

H. Gzella. *Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Reichsaramäischen*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2004. IX + 408 pp.

The book under review is the author's *Habilitationsschrift* in Semitic philology. Gzella explains his method as typological: the general linguistic concepts of temporal reference, aspect and modality build his starting point, while the goal of his research is to describe the ways by which Imperial Aramaic (= IA) encodes these meanings.

The monograph contains 330 pages of "net" text (after the deduction of bibliography and indexes). Two chapters of general linguistic, Semitological and Aramaistic preliminaries to the study of IA verb occupy exactly one third of these 330 pages. Introductory considerations are followed by chapters dealing separately with tense (ch. 3), aspect (ch. 4), modality and subordination (ch. 5), and with "pragmatic functions" such as grounding and topicalization (a rudimentary ch. 6 comprising three pages). The chapter on tense is almost three times as long as the rest of the chapters that treat specific semantic areas, and this is justified by the nature of the morphological material under consideration.

In the final chapter Gzella provides a synopsis of his results in the inverted order, i. e. from a morphological form (Pf., Impf., Imv., Part., Inf.) to its functions, in the way of traditional grammars. This chapter also offers a "historical perspective" on the IA verb and a short English summary of the whole book.

Two introductory chapters of the monograph («Über Absicht und Methode» and «Typologie und Struktur») are encyclopedic in their scope. The author evaluates the state of the art in the study of Semitic verb and explains notions of functionally oriented linguistic typology that he in some way or other uses in the rest of his study.¹

In both the general and the "special" parts of the volume one comes across quite a few statements and observations that are correct, yet they are usually not that new or very surprising.

Thus, Gzella is quite right when he observes that Semitic philology often approached problems of verb's morphological semantics (such as tense-aspect treated in Gzella's monograph) on the basis of ideas bor-

¹ He also appends a glossary of linguistic terms at the end of the volume.

rowed from more advanced philological disciplines (e. g. Indo-European studies) rather than through an in-depth analysis of all relevant evidence.

Gzella rejects the “aspect only” theory of the verb in Imperial Aramaic and other ancient Central Semitic languages and claims that the indicative finite verb forms in these languages have no basic meanings, no grammatical “essences.” As he puts it in his English summary, ‘the hypothesis that there is a basic function, that is, something like the essence of a certain grammatical category which lies at the heart of the manifold individual functions within the actual usage of a given language, has to be abandoned’ (p. 326).

Gzella’s criticism of the pan-aspectual theory in Semitic studies is to my mind both correct and not especially new.² In a purely aspectual (and “tenseless”) language no morphologically indicative verb phrase, if taken out of its context, will contain a hint as to its temporal reference, unless the respective clause is supplied with temporal adverbials or other “external” temporal clues. This is evidently not the case with independent sentences in BH prose dialogues or Egyptian Aramaic letters. Gzella is quite right that the IA Pf. ‘ist ... ausdrücklichen adverbialen Zeitangaben, die Sachverhalten einen präteritalen Zeitstellenwert verleihen, vollkommen gleichwertig’ (p. 114). It is also true that the IA verb is much more “tensed” than it is “aspected,” and I believe that this approach is correct for some other classical Semitic languages, e. g. Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew.

Yet the “no basic function” theory of the IA verb is hardly correct. The morphological shapes of the IA finite forms and predicative participles are not devoid of semantic kernels (see below).

Turning to other Gzella’s statements that in my opinion are not correct: some of his mistakes in the introductory part of the book are typical of popular *Summae* written by a single author. E. g., most of Gzella’s references to Akkadian betray his poor knowledge of both the language and the Assyriological literature. Thus, he believes that, due to dialectal variety of Akkadian, Assyriologists have hard times looking for ‘eine normative Varietät des Akkadischen’ (p. 4). He claims that the Akkadian verbal syntax is not “einheitlich” in particular because the Boğazköy (i. e. peripheral Akkadian) texts use the *t*-Perfect ‘als normales Erzähltempus’ (p. 4 fn. 12), probably unaware that this usage is regular in MB letters and in most MA documents.³ The *t*-Perfect suffers in Gzella’s hands

² See e. g. Zaborsky 2002 and Joosten 2002.

³ GAG § 80f., Aro 1955:81f., Mayer 1971:58, Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996:63.

elsewhere in this book: the author ascribes J. Huehnergard the idea that ‘das *t*-Perfekt in altbabylonischen Briefen unter Vernachlässigung seiner sonstigen Funktionen die Kernaussage hervorhebt’ (p. 89). This suggestion is simply due to Gzella’s misunderstanding of a passage from Huehnergard 1997 (p. 157–158), which is a non-technical introduction for beginning learners of Akkadian, written by a scholar whose major research field is neither OB nor synchronic verbal syntax of Akkadian.⁴

Gzella suggests these and other observations on Akkadian in order to prop some of his underlying presuppositions, and in particular to show that IA (unlike Akkadian) is especially well-suited for the pioneering pilot study of Semitic verb that he offers us in the book under review.⁵ In the course of his investigation, he often supports his ideas by typological parallels from numerous languages of the world and by references to contemporary theoretical linguistic thinking. The present reviewer is unable to check all this material, yet one remark is perhaps in order.

In my view, Gzella’s words on Stammbau vs. Sprachbund / areal diffusion are especially murky, while of course consonant with the *Zeitgeist*. He joins (sure enough, with cautious reservations) the chorus of those questioning the soundness of the traditional historical comparative method: ‘Doch ist in den letzten Jahren die Sensibilität dafür gewachsen, daß die Annahme genetisch verwandten Sprachfamilien möglicherweise nicht in der Sache selbst begründet ist, sondern zum wissenschaftsgeschichtlichen Erbe der historisch-vergleichenden Philologie gehört’ (p. 24). Doing duty of a *Summa*-writer who has to have opinions about everything, Gzella suggests that the comparative method is conditioned by the nineteenth-century genealogical and evolutionary scientific paradigm and therefore its validity is somehow suspect: ‘Aber die Einsicht in die geschichtliche Bedingtheit dieses Ansatzes hat vielerorts zur Entwicklung alternativer Theorien geführt’ (p. 25). Gzella sees a sign of the “paradigm shift” especially in Robert Dixon’s “punctuated equilibrium” theory (Dixon 1997).

I will not discuss this particular paradigm shift, but it is perhaps appropriate to quote here a few words from Martin Haspelmath’s review of ‘Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Problems in Comparative Linguistics’ (Aikhenvald–Dixon eds. 2001):⁶

⁴ Huehnergard’s treatment of the *t*-Perfect as coding ‘the central statement’ of a letter (his example is *inanna PN ana mahrika attardam*) is admittedly confusing.

⁵ For even more serious sins Gzella committed against Akkadian, see the review of J. Tropper (Tropper 2005).

⁶ Most papers in this volume address Dixon’s theory.

‘When reading this volume, one can get the overall impression that research on areal linguistics is currently still in the hunting and gathering stage. <...> [T]he volume does not break any new ground, the way Greenberg (1963) broke new ground for typology when he began to search for universals in an empirical and controlled way, thus propelling typology from its hunting and gathering (and speculating) stage to a stage of systematic “cultivation”’ (Haspelmath 2004:221f.).

The only borrowing Gzella locates in the IA verbal system will be discussed below.

The major part of Gzella’s corpus consists of the IA documents from Egypt and the Biblical Aramaic. He also uses some of the Qumran Aramaic documents, mostly GenAp. I believe that this corpus is not suited for a synchronic study of the verbal syntax: it is well-known⁷ that EgAr⁸ and BiAr are rather different as far as the encoding of temporal references goes. From the point of view of tense grammar, these two corpora represent consecutive stages of the diachronic development within the first millennium BC Aramaic. Consider the following table based on the secondary literature mentioned in fn. 7 (Gzella’s results are of course in accord with it):

semantic domain	EgAr	BiAr
past/narrative tense	Pf.	Pf.; narrative Pt. in Dan; Impf. to encode narrative background in Dan. Pt. to encode past tense imperf. aspect in Dan.
present	Pt.; Impf. with non-referential readings in embedded clauses	Pt.; Impf. with non-referential readings in embedded clauses
future	Impf.	Impf. and Pt.
Koinzidenzfall	Pf.	Pt.

The uses of Pt. and Impf. for past-time references in the narratives of Dan are diachronically a blind alley in so far as they first appear in Dan and have no plausible genealogical succession in the Aramaic languages of the first millennium AD. In other words, these peculiar usages build no starting point of a future development. Most probably, they were no features of an Aramaic vernacular and have to be studied separately as

⁷ See e. g. Bauer–Leander 1927 and Muraoka–Porten 1998. Cf. also Loesov 2005:120–123 for a comparison of the verb’s grammatical semantics in both dialects.

⁸ EgAr stands here for the IA documents from Egypt rather than for all extant Aramaic texts found in Egypt.

“artificial” devices of a purely literary idiom, like so many traits of the Biblical Hebrew verbal morphosyntax.

If we leave these “literary” peculiarities aside and compare the most basic features of morphological semantics of both corpora, then BiAr is different from EgAr in its methods of encoding future references and Koinzidenzfall: in both cases BiAr aligns with Classical Syriac, a more “advanced” manifestation of the Aramaic speech-type.⁹

Sure enough, Gzella is aware of these dangers and does his best to restore the synchronic unity of the corpus of his *Habilitationsschrift*, as e. g. the following reservation shows: ‘Die wenigen Beispiele, die zur Diskussion stehen, wehren jedoch dem Vedacht, das narrative Partizip einzig als ein Proprium des Biblisch-Aramäischen zu buchen und es aus seinem reichsaramäischen Kontext zu lösen...’ (p. 121). Yet, on p. 131 the author puts forward only one example of the narrative participle in EgAr that he deems reliable, TAD B2.8, 4f. Common sense prescribes that a monograph-size typologically oriented description of tense-aspect of a language has to beware of all kinds of *hapax legomena*.

Gzella also produces one example of the performative Pf. in BiAr, Ezra 4:14b: *ʿal dānā šālahnā wə-hōdāʿnā lə-malkā* (p. 210), yet this is doubtless an “epistolary” rather than a performative usage: ‘therefore we have sent this information to the king.’¹⁰

This separation of both corpora on strictly synchronic grounds has an additional advantage: if we keep EgAr and BiAr apart and isolate narrative passages of Dan as a corpus to be studied on its own,¹¹ Gzella’s hypothesis about ‘no basic meaning’ of morphological forms will be much less needed.

The author’s unwillingness to adhere to a strictly synchronic procedure actually has much in common with the familiar ways of the traditional North-West Semitic philology, the very philology from which Gzella wants to distance himself by taking “the less traveled by”¹² road of functionally oriented linguistics.

⁹ See Loesov 2005 for an attempt to explain these differences between EgAr and BiAr, with a special attention to the encoding of the performative force.

¹⁰ Cf. Pardee–Whiting 1987:28 fn. 84. I understand the semantic relationship of the two Pfs in Ezra 4:14b as a kind of hendiadys. For possible (though perhaps not always probable) tokens of the epistolary Pf. in EgAr letters, see Dempsey 1990.

¹¹ Cross-linguistically, temporal relationships in literary narratives often receive all kinds of “special” encoding. Stock examples in Semitics are Standard Biblical Hebrew prose and Ugaritic epic narratives.

¹² Gzella couches his self-understanding in these words of Robert Frost that stand as an epigraph to ch. 1 «Über Absicht und Methode».

In this respect it is especially noteworthy that Gzella was able to fill some ten pages (pp. 184–194) of his book discussing “Eine persische Perfektkonstruktion,” i. e. the perfect-resultative periphrasis known in Aramaic studies as “*qtīl-l-* construction.” Within what purports to be a standard synchronic description of tense-aspect in IA, this kind of attention is perhaps an exaggeration, given that only two reliable tokens of this construction are attested in IA (p. 187), both with the same verb *šmʿ* ‘hear’: *šmyʿ ly* ‘I have heard’ (TAD A6.10, 3), and *šmyʿ ln* ‘we had heard’ (TAD A3.3, 13). Thus, it is clear that the *qtīl-l-* construction was no part of the tense-aspect system of IA as we know it from extant sources. In this particular case, a Semitist who is smart enough to pontificate on what both synchronic and diachronic linguistics are all about would fare much better limiting the discussion to a footnote.

As is well known, the marginal attestation of *qtīl l-* in IA somehow foreshadowed its flourishing in various Eastern Aramaic idioms, both early medieval and new ones.¹³ Gzella’s treatment of this diachronic development is to my mind misleading.

Gzella takes it for granted that this new Aramaic “perfect” is a borrowing from Iranian (see especially Kutscher 1969 for a brilliant if partisan attempt to make this idea plausible). Given that (1) the assumed Iranian source construction is itself an Old Persian innovation and (2) the emergence of the PERFECT from possessive constructions is well attested cross-language (see Hopkins 1989 and Goldenberg 1992, both with further literature), the view that the active Eastern Aramaic *qtīl l-* is a borrowing will be hardly ever definitely proven.

According to Gzella, ‘[h]öchstwahrscheinlich haben die ostaramäischen Literatursprachen sie aus dem Reichsaramäischen übernommen’ (p. 189). This is to my mind «höchstunwahrscheinlich», because the active *qtīl l-* is not attested in the Western Aramaic literary languages, while it is productive in Classical Syriac (Goldenberg 1992:117, with further literature) and attested in Mandaic and JBA.¹⁴ For this reason, Gzella’s sugges-

¹³ See e. g. Kutscher 1969, Hopkins 1989 and Goldenberg 1992, as well as descriptions of modern Eastern Aramaic languages.

¹⁴ Thus Gzella’s statement that this construction ‘findet sich sporadisch auch im Syrischen’ (p. 189) is also misleading. Eastern Aramaic has been in permanent contact with Iranian languages since mid-first millennium BC. For this reason the fact the active *qtīl l-* is attested only in Eastern Aramaic literary languages (while **qtīl l-* based preterites are ubiquitous in the new Eastern Aramaic idioms and absent from Maʿlūla) is the only viable argument in favour of the borrowing hypothesis. Yet in my opinion a less strong claim is that the active *qtīl l-* is a shared

tion that the **qtāl l-* based preterites of new Eastern Aramaic languages emerged due to ‘einem weiteren Sprachkontakt’ with Iranian languages (p. 193) is unnecessary. Most importantly, already Hopkins 1989 drew our attention to the fact that Turoyo employs **qtāl l-* as the preterite base for transitive verbs only, while in ‘the great bulk of Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects studied so far the preterite possesses a uniform inflection without regard to genus verbi at all’ (p. 424).¹⁵ Diachronically, this most probably means that the active *qtāl l-* of transitive verbs is a shared innovation of the proto-Eastern Aramaic; the lot of this innovation was different in various daughter languages of the proto-Eastern Aramaic.

Summing up: in spite of the author’s vast learning, the monograph under review will probably end up being more important for his list of publications than for our understanding of the IA verb.

S. Loesov

References

- Aikhenvald–Dixon (eds.) 2001 A. Yu. Aikhenvald; R. M. W. Dixon (eds.). *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Problems in Comparative Linguistics*. Cambridge.
- Aro 1955 Aro, J. *Studien zur mittelbabylonischen Grammatik*. Helsinki.
- Bauer–Leander 1927 Bauer, H.; Leander, P. *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäischen*. Halle.
- Beyer 1984 Beyer, K. *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer*. Göttingen.
- Cancik–Kirschbaum 1996 Cancik–Kirschbaum, E. C. *Die mittellassyrischen Briefe aus Tall Šēḫ Ḥamad* (BATSH 4, Texte 1). Berlin.
- Dempsey 1990 Dempsey, D. The “Epistolary Perfect” in Aramaic Letters. *BN* 54:7–11.
- Dixon 1997 Dixon, R. M. W. *The Rise and Fall of Languages*. Cambridge.
- Goldenberg 1992 Goldenberg, G. Aramaic Perfects. *IOS* 12:113–137.
- Greenberg (ed.) 1963 J. H. Greenberg (ed.). *Universals of Language*. Cambridge.
- Haspelmath 2004 Haspelmath, M. How Hopeless is Genealogical Linguistics, and How Advanced is Areal Linguistics? *Studies in Language* 28:1:209–223.

innovation of the Eastern Aramaic, probably antedating its contact with Iranian. On this hypothesis, both tokens of *šm^s l-* in EgAr might be due to either Eastern Aramaic (cf. Beyer 1984:98) or Old Persian influence (note that TAD A6.10 was written by a Persian official in Egypt).

¹⁵ I. e. it has the base built on **qtāl l-* / *qām l-*.

-
- Hopkins 1989 Hopkins, S. Neo-Aramaic Dialects and the Formation of the Preterite. *JSS* 34:413–432.
- Huehnergard 1997 Huehnergard, J. *A Grammar of Akkadian* (HSS 45). Atlanta.
- Joosten 2002 Joosten, J. Do the Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Express Aspect? *JANES* 29:49–70.
- Kutscher 1969 Kutscher, E. Y. Two ‘Passive’ Constructions in Aramaic in the Light of Persian. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Semitic Studies, Jerusalem, 19–23 July 1965*. Jerusalem. Pp. 132–151.
- Loesov 2005 Loesov, S. Akkadian Sentences about the Present Time (I). *B&B* 2:101–148.
- Mayer 1971 Mayer, W. *Untersuchungen zur Grammatik des Mittelassyrischen*. Neukirchen-Vluyn.
- Muraoka–Porten 1998 Muraoka, T.; Porten, B. *A Grammar of Egyptian Aramaic*. Leiden.
- Pardee–Whiting 1987 Pardee, D.; Whiting, R. M. Aspects of Epistolary Verbal Usage in Ugaritic and Akkadian. *BSOAS* 50:1–31.
- Tropper 2005 Tropper, J. Review of H. Gzella, *Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Reichsaramäische* (Wiesbaden, 2004). *OLZ* 100: 538–542.
- Zaborsky 2002 Zaborsky, A. On the Interplay of Tense, Aspect, and Aktionsart in Semitic Languages. «*Sprich doch mit deinen Knechten aramäisch, wir verstehen es!*». *Fs. für Otto Jastrow*. Wiesbaden. Pp. 869–876.