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Bardaisan's Book of the Laws of the Countries : a computer-assisted linguistic analysis

Bakker, D.

Citation

Bakker, D. (2011, April 20). *Bardaisan's Book of the Laws of the Countries : a computer-assisted linguistic analysis*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17580>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 5

SUMMARY AND GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In my Introduction (Chapter 1, Section 2) I have explained the challenge which a linguist faces when he wants to analyze a language that is no longer spoken. The fact that native speakers are not available as a source of information, means that the language cannot be studied in its 'natural habitat', the only available information regarding its intricacies existing in the form of written corpora. This challenge has been the reason for the Turgama model to adopt a corpus-linguistic approach, which aims to focus as much as possible on the distributional surface phenomena in the texts themselves, with as little interference from external, 'grammar-driven' knowledge about the language as possible. That this ideal of an entirely 'data-driven' analysis can only be approximated is reflected in the fact that the Turgama model contains several stages where human input is required: firstly in the basic set of morphological rules in the form of a 'word grammar', and secondly in the interactive procedure (Chapter 1, Section 2.2) where human and computer provide their constant mutual feedback.

During my research it has become clear that what applies to the human input on the linguistic level is even more true where knowledge of the text itself is concerned. Even with the help of sophisticated computational methods, an accurate linguistic analysis of a corpus cannot be performed by relying solely on the grammatical aspects of its language. When unclear or ambiguous forms are encountered where the purely grammatical data is insufficient, the scholar must rely on context, content and his general knowledge of the world to be able to make a decision. In other words, the analysis of the language of a corpus entails a constant overlap between the linguistic and the philological.

That this interaction is relevant for the analysis of the Book of the Laws of the Countries as well does not only show in the mere fact that the topic

of the text has an influence on its linguistic aspects (e.g., the abundance of proper, geographical and gentilic names), but also in the various cases where I had to rely on philological considerations in order to make accurate linguistic judgments, be it in the interpretation of the *waw* in ܡܝܢ ܕܥܝܪܐܢܐ as a *waw explicativum* (in Syria, **namely** in Edessa: Chapter 2, note 22), the decision regarding the identity of the interjection ܐܝܬܐ (Chapter 3, note 164), the analysis of the construction ܐܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ (Chapter 3, Section 2.1.2.4) or the assessment of the theme and rheme in a clause (Chapter 4).

For these reasons, although the present study deals with the linguistic aspects of BLC, it cannot be complete without a brief outline of its contents, which I have provided in Chapter 1 (Section 1), along with a survey on the history of research concerning its provenance and authenticity. In the same chapter I have pointed out the difficulties that arise when assessing the textual basis for a text of which only one witness is available, such as discerning the several textual layers out of which it was composed and attempting to put those layers in a likely relative temporal order.

In Chapter 2, I have shown how the orthographical and morphological peculiarities of BLC reflect a linguistic profile that fits within the Syriac of the 6th or 7th century, thus concurring with the time when the manuscript was copied, rather than the time when the text itself was composed.

Furthermore, it became clear from my description of the orthography that its peculiarities are affected by a threefold interaction: 1. between the encyclopaedic and the linguistic (in the fact that one word can have several semantic referents; e.g., the name ܐܒܓܪ *Abgar*, which may refer to different persons; or that the same referent can be indicated by different terms; e.g., ܐܠܗܐ and ܕܝܐ for *God*, or ܝܢܕܝܐ and ܝܢܕܝܐ for *India*); 2. between the orthographical and the morphological (e.g., whether two varieties of the same word, such as ܐܬܐ vs. ܐܬܐ *Hatra*, merely reflect a difference in spelling or indicate the existence of two different lexemes with different pronunciations); and 3. between common nouns and proper nouns (the fact that, e.g., the names for the astrological constellations are inherently common nouns (ܐܬܐ *crab*, ܐܬܐ *lamb*, etc.) and only in the context gain status as proper nouns (*Cancer*, *Aries*, etc.)).

Chapter 3 consisted of a thorough survey of all phrase types and patterns attested in BLC. Instead of merely listing the separate building blocks

which can constitute a phrase, I have meticulously investigated the possible ways in which those building blocks (divided into heads and extensions) are used to create clause constituents. This survey proved especially insightful in light of the dichotomy between linguistic theory and observed practice. Whereas the recursivity of linguistic structure predicts a theoretical infinity of possible combinations, in practice there is always an upper limit to the complexity of the constructions that are attested in a corpus. Thus I found that in BLC, an NP can have a maximum of six parallel heads, that an NP head itself can consist of no more than two consecutive construct nouns, while the amount of separate extensions that an NP can take has a maximum of four. The amount to which phrase extension is recursive (i.e., the number of embedded steps whereby an extension is extended itself) turned out to be three at most (i.e., an extension to an extension to an extension to an NP head).

In Chapter 4, finally, I investigated the way in which clause constituents in BLC behave within a clause. I chose to focus on the phenomenon of constituent fronting in verbal clauses, in relation to its possible pragmatic implications (e.g., the marking of the theme and rheme) as well as its effects on participant activation (introduction, continuation or reactivation). Departing from the observation that the language of BLC keeps rather consistently to the default Semitic VSO constituent order, I have attempted to explain deviations from this standard in those cases where one or more constituents are fronted; i.e., located in a position before the verb. It turned out that BLC shows several correlations between the grammatical function of fronted constituents and their pragmatic functions. As I have shown, for instance, a fronted subject has a significant preference towards marking the theme, whereas a fronted object tends to mark the rheme. In contrast to other clause constituent types, adjuncts (especially temporal adjuncts) show a strong preference for a position in the preverbal field, a phenomenon that seems to fit well with their inherent function of describing a state of affairs, known in Functional Grammar as 'setting'. Even more pronounced than their role in marking the theme or rheme is the way in which fronted constituents perform participant activation. This is especially evident in the correlation between the 'heaviness' of the phrase type of which the fronted constituent consists, and the 'strength' of the type of participant activation:

generally speaking, fronted constituents consisting of NPs will typically perform the strongest type of activation; i.e., introduction, DPrPs tend to effect the weaker type; i.e., reactivation, whereas PPrP constituents are most likely to result in the weakest type; i.e., continuation. Furthermore, I have shown that when more than one constituent is fronted, they seem to show a rather consistent relative order:

subject – complement – object – adjunct / modifier.

In my survey of the linguistic peculiarities of BLC I have necessarily been selective, selecting only a few out of the tremendous amount of possible phenomena. Even so, I have attempted to focus on topics that have hitherto only been studied tentatively, such as the behaviour of internal clause constituent structure, and the peculiarities of the verbal, rather than the much-studied non-verbal clause.

Undoubtedly, much more research on the language of BLC can and must be done to do justice to this unique representative of early Syriac literature. Among many other things, a linguistically accurate and up-to-date scholarly edition of the text remains a desideratum. I hope to have offered a contribution towards such goals, providing a deeper insight not only in a variety of linguistic peculiarities of BLC, but in the language of the early Classical Syriac period in general.