REVIEW of Li, Tarsee (2008). Non-Active Participles in the Aramaic of Daniel. *Aramaic Studies,* 6(1), 111-136 – Margherita Farina

The article analyses the uses and functions of the Aramaic so-called *passive* or non-active participles and of the *t*-stem participles in the book of Daniel. The aim is to demonstrate that:

> at the diachronic stage of the language attested in the Aramaic of Daniel, the so-called passive participle is primarily a verbal adjective that is developing into a resultative participle, whereas the t-stem participles are the true passive (and reflexive) counterparts of the active participle Li (2008):112.

Here the term *passive* refers to a certain morphological pattern and not to a semantic value.

In this review I will adopt the expression *non-active*, used by Li (among others), in order to avoid possible confusion between morphological structures and functions.

1. *Non-active participles*

After a brief preliminary discussion on voice and on the values traditionally attributed to t- stem and to non-active participles (reflexive-passive and resultative-stative, respectively), the author focuses on the values of the *non-active* participle.

According to Li, in the Book of Daniel, the *non-active* participles have essentially an attributive function: They almost never serve as verbs[1] and, being derived from adjectival patterns, still preserve a lot of their original value.

Li argues partially against the thesis, proposed, among others, by Goldenberg (1992)

---

[1] "The vast majority of the possible 33 instances of passive participles/verbal adjectives in the Aramaic of Daniel are clearly non-verbal in function": Li (2008):121.

and, for Syriac, by Nöldeke (1898 (repr. 1966)) that Aramaic *non-active* participles express essentially a resulting state.

Li argues that, in the Aramaic attested in the book of Daniel, the grammaticalization process that has led to the resultative participles, is still at a very early stage. For this reason most *non-active* participles function as adjectives[2]. This is certainly very well demonstrated by the interesting list of examples given by Li.

Nevertheless, there is no need to see a contradiction between the general assumption that *non-active* participles express a state[3] and their adjectival function. An adjective indicates a permanent or temporary quality of the noun it modifies.

A state verb also indicates temporary or permanent qualities or conditions of the subject[4]. Therefore, the passage of a de-verbal adjective to the status of participle expressing a state is not difficult to understand.

What is important to notice is that, quite often, it is the interpretation given in the translation in other languages that makes one or the other function emerge as predominant.

The author groups the *non-active* participles in the book of Daniel, according to the following functions:

- resultative, 9 out of 33 occurrences. All the examples listed by Li[5] are from transitive verbs;

- denoting "potential or habitual/customary situations" Li (2008):118. These, according to Li, are all derived from transitive verbs;

- stative/adjectival. These are both from intransitive and transitive verbs.

Examining the example chosen by Li (also not the ones that are labeled as 'debatable' by the author himself), one can see that sometimes the border between the resultative and the stative/adjectival function is not so clear.

---

[2] "The attested resultative instances suggest that the so called passive participle is in the process of developing from verbal adjective to a resultative participle, but, given the fact that non-resultative instances outnumber resultative instances, the resultative function is still in the early stages of development, and will be more pronounced in later Aramaic" Li (2008):120.

[3] Participles of the *qṭîl* pattern, in Syriac, express a resulting state, or anyway a state associated with the semantic value of the basic stem. The actional value of the great majority of participles is that of *state*. They are also most frequently associated with an imperfective aspect.

[4] In English one can say *the beautiful girl*, but one can also imagine another language in which a verb 'to be beautiful' exist (cf. Syriac *špar*, Arabic *ḥasuna*) and where the same sentence would sound *the girl that is/was being beautiful*.

[5] Li (2008):118.

Dan 3.23

nplwn	*lgw'*	*'twn*	*nwr'*	*yqdt'*	*mkptyn*
III m. pl. pf. 'fall'	prep. 'inside'	cs. st. 'oven'	ʿfire'	act. ptc. f. sg. 'to burn'	pass. ptc. *pa''el* 'bind, tie'

"They fell down *bound* into the furnace of burning fire"[6].

mkptyn 'bound' is considered by Li as a resultative participle. What is not entirely clear, from this example, is in which sense the fact that *mkpptyn* expresses a state, resulting from a previous action, would differentiate it from the participles that Li calls stative/adjectival. In Dan 3.23 *mkpptyn* has an adjectival function, it expresses a circumstance under which the main event of falling takes place and it could be replaced by expressions such as 'unhappy', 'afraid', 'together' etc.

The difference seems to be, instead, more in the basic value of the verbal roots from which the various participles stem. The resultative meaning is unlikely to be associated with stative non-processual roots, such as *'ṣb* 'to be grieved', *nqy* 'to be clean' etc. the non-active participles of which Li lists among stative/adjectival ones (Li 2008):119.

From this perspective, the difference between the two non-active participles can be re-connected to the general observation mentioned above, that intransitive verbal roots usually have a stative *non-active* participle, whereas transitive verbal roots (or stems!) have a passive/resultative *non-active* participle.

In this respect it is very important also to take into account the stem from which the *non-active* participles are built: *mkptyn* is a *pa''el*, intensive-causative stem, while *'ṣyb* 'sad' (Dan 6.21) and *nq'* 'clean' (Dan 7.9) are built on the basic stem.

2. *T-stem participles*

Li's observations on t-stem participles are a bit more problematic than those on *non-active* participles.

T-stem participles have mainly a verbal function, but can also be used adjectivally. According to the author, such participles should be considered as "the true passive (and reflexive) counterpart of the active participle" Li (2008):125. Moreover, Li maintains that the t-stem participle, when used as a finite verb, has an imperfective value[7].

---

6   Li (2008):118.

2.1 *The true passive*

Li does not discuss the traditional theory according to which Aramaic t-stems express passive and reflexive/reciprocal voice. Moreover, he does not give any morphological, syntactic or semantic definition of passive, reflexive and reciprocal, respectively.

On a general perspective, he finds that all the t-stem participles in the book of Daniel fit into one of these categories.

I will try here to give two very simplified definitions of passive and reflexive respectively, that may serve as guidelines in the analysis of the biblical passages involved.

It is a well known fact that the languages of the world express passive in many different ways (when they express it) and that passive morphology is very unstable and often problematic. Nevertheless, it is important to make reference to a shared definition, when it comes to evaluating whether a structure is or not to be considered a passive.

I will here refer to the observations on passive made by Shibatani (1988):

> in the prototypical passive form a patient functions as a subject and an agent is syntactically unencoded (or, even if it is encoded, its grammatical prominence is marginal). […] The typical active-passive opposition shows a semantic contrast as well in that in the active form, the subject acts upon others or affects others, while in the passive form, the subject is affected or undergoes the effect. Shibatani (1988), *Introduction*: 3-4.

Shibatani also considers the correlation existing between the middle and the passive voice, which share the property of having a subject in the role of undergoer. Nevertheless, Shibatani points also at an important difference between passive and middle voice, that is crucial for the evaluation of the examples examined by Li:

> The active-middle and active-inactive oppositions, however, are characteristically different from the active-passive opposition in that they do not involve a change in the subject status of the nominal arguments involved. Shibatani (1988), *Introduction*: 4.

As regards reflexive domain, I will refer here to the definition given by Kemmer (1993)

---

[7]   Since I argue elsewhere that the active participle in the Aramaic of Daniel expresses primarily an imperfective aspect when functioning as a finite verb, the t-stem participle is a passive/reflexive imperfective" {Li, 2008 #141}:125.

:24:

> Most languages have a special marker to indicate that the Agent and the Patient (or analogous semantic roles) in an event ordinarily involving two such roles are the same entity. Such markers, which are translationally equivalent to himself in the English sentence He saw himself, are called reflexive markers (RM).

Therefore, for an action to be reflexive, there has to be a specific RM and the agent and the patient of a transitive action must coincide.

The four t-stems that are classified as passive by the author (2.13, 5.6, 5.9a,b) are built from the following verbal roots: *qṭl* eto killf, *šry* eloosenf, *bhl* eto be troubledf (basic stem not attested), *šbš* (basic stem not attested) eto confusef. I will first list all the passages in which such forms occur and then analyze both their syntactical context and their semantic value.

Dan 2.13

w-dt'	*npqt*	*w-ḥkymy'*	*mtqṭlyn*
conj. 'and' + 'decree'	III f. sg. pf. 'go out'	conj. 'and' + adj. pl. 'wise'	ptc. m. pl. *etpʿel* 'kill'

w-bʿw	*dn'yl*	*w-ḥbrwhy*	*l-htqṭlh*
conj. 'and' + III m. pl. pf. 'seek, pray'	'Daniel'	conj. 'and' + 'friends' + pron. suff. III m. sg.	prep. 'to' + inf. *etp.* 'kill'

"And the decree went out, and the wise men *would be killed* and sought Daniel and his friends to be killed".

Dan 5.6

w-qṭry	*ḥrṣ-h*	*mštryn*
conj. 'and' + pl 'knot, joint'	'loin' + pron. suff. III m. sg.	ptc. etp. m. pl. 'loosen'

"And the joints of his hips were loosened"[8].

---

[8]   The expression is metaphoric and describes the reaction of fear of the king.

Dan 5.9a-b

'dynmlk'bl š'ṣr	*sgy'*	*mtbhl* [...]	*w-rbrbnwhy*	*mštbšyn*
conj. 'then''king''Ba lshazzar	adv. 'greatly'	ptc. etp. m. sg. 'to be troubled'	conj. 'and' + pl. 'noble' + suff. pron. III m. sg.	ptc. etpa. m. pl. 'to confuse'

"Then the king Balshazzar feared greatly [...] and his nobles were confused".

The t-stem participles involved are:

- *mtqṭlyn*: participle plural masculine of the Gt stem of the verbal root *qṭl*;

- *mštryn*: participle plural masculine of the Gt stem of the verbal root *šry*;

- *mtbhl*: participle singular masculine of the Gt stem of the verbal root *bhl;*
- *mštbšyn*: participle plural masculine of the Dt stem of the verbal root *šbš*.

Qṭl is a highly transitive verbal root. The agent has high volitionality a high control on the action. Nevertheless, no agent is explicitly mentioned in the sentence, nor is it relevant for the development of the action. The focus of the discourse is on the order given that the wise man must be put to death.

Šry in the basic stem means 'to loosen' and in the Gt-stem means 'to be loosened, untied'. In Dan 5.6 the t-stem participle is used to describe the fear of the king, whose legs are shaking and whose face becomes pale. The t-stem describes therefore a spontaneous event, involving a body part and cannot be considered as having a passive function. It does not express in any way that the subject is undergoing an event by the intervention of an external causer.

Bhl is not attested in the basic stem. The *pa''el* means 'to trouble', the Gt-stem means 'to be frightened'. The t-stem participle is used in Dan 5.9 to express an emotion, a feeling. There are no indications that the subject here undergoes an action.

Šbš in the basic stem is not attested; the *pa''el* means 'to confuse', the Dt 'to be confounded'. Again, the t-stem expresses the state of mind, the emotions of the subject and does not make reference to any passive event: there is no mention of an agent/causer.

Of the four examples given by Li of a 'passive' function of the t-stem participle, only one appears to have actually passive meaning. Moreover, such a meaning seems to

depend more on the semantics of the verbal root, than on the syntax of the clause.

The remaining three t-stem participle express body actions and emotions, that are experienced by the subject and not provoked by any explicitly mentioned external agent. The events described by such participles cannot be classified as reflexive either, because they do not involve the use of any reflexive marker and are not performed by their subjects on themselves. They are experienced by their subjects. From the semantic point of view, they belong to categories that are typically related to middle voice, according to the study by (Kemmer 1993).

In the light of what has been observed in this paragraph, it is not possible to conclude, with Li, that the instances of t-stem participles analyzed are "definitely passive" (Li 2008):126 and, more in general, that the t-stem participle is simply the true passive counterpart of the active participle in the Aramaic of Daniel.

2.2 *The imperfective value*

As regards the statement that t-stem participles have an imperfective value, the interpretation given by Li of the biblical passages needs to be discussed. Li's assumption is based on Dan 2.13 and on Dan 3.3.

The author translates Dan 2.13 as "The decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed, and they sought to have Daniel and his friends killed" (Li 2008):126.

The translation of the participle *mtqṭlyn* "were about to be killed" is an interpretation and does not correspond literally to the Aramaic text. The participle here expresses the content of the decree, namely that the wise men 'will be killed'. If one wants to give the sentence a modal value, to respect a bit more the rules of English syntax, one can say 'would be killed', but by no means does the Aramaic express an imminent/impending value, as Li maintains (Li 2008):127.

Moreover, even if this would be the case, it would not allow for an imperfective interpretation of the participle.

Let us examine the reasoning that leads Li to conclude for an imperfective value:

> In the above example [scil. Dan 2.13], the t-stem participle is either imminent/impending, i.e. it denotes an action soon to take place or tendential i.e., it denotes an attempted but not (yet) completed action. These are imperfective functions, since actions are viewed before completion Li (2008):127-128.

7

   We have here a confusion between two different functions: the modal and the aspectual one. Being logically related to the noun *dt'* 'decree' and expressing an intention, the participle *mtqṭlyn* has a modal volitive value. In this sense one could consider it as "tendential" in Li's words. From the aspectual point of view, nevertheless, the action is described as already accomplished, is considered as a whole and not *during* its taking place. The future tense is not preferentially related to imperfectivity, just because it describes events that still have to take place. On the contrary, often a future event is viewed by the speaker as completed[9]. Let us consider the following sentences:

   1. Tomorrow at five I will buy you a rose.

   2. Tomorrow at five, when you will read these lines, I will be buying you a rose.

   In 1 the aspect is perfective, in 2 imperfective. In both cases we have the description of an event that still has to take place, an intention of the speaker.

The aspect is a point of view on the action, not necessarily corresponding to the actual position of the speaker with respect to such action (if this would be the case, all past events should be described as perfectives).

The other passages that Li quotes as a prove of the imperfective value of the t-stem participle is Dan 3.3:

   Dan 3.3

b'dyn	*mtknšyn*	*…w-q'myn*	*lqbl*	*ṣlm'*
conj. 'then'	ptc. etp. m. pl. 'gather'	conj. 'and' + ptc. act. 'stand'	adv. 'in front of'	'statue'

   "Then…[the officials] were being gathered and were standing before the statue" Li (2008):128.

   In this case we have a confusion between the iteration of a series of events and the single events that compose such a series. The process of gathering is a durative action that is both iterative (repeated many times) and distributive (it applies to every single official). If the general process of gathering all the officials is viewed imperfectively, the single events that constitute, all together, the iterative sequence, are nevertheless not imperfective but perfective. The participle *mtknšyn* 'were (being) gathered', being personal and referring to the officials, is distributive. The fact that the action of gathering is viewed as a completed process in its single phases is actually demonstrated by the presence of the participle *q'myn*: in spite of what Li maintains, the order of the

---

[9]   For the aspectual value of the future cf. Bertinetto (1986): 483-510.

events is that the single persons are *first* gathered and *then* stand before the statue.

On the basis of what has been argued so far, I believe that there is no reason to maintain that t-stem participle in the Aramaic of Daniel (and in Aramaic in general) has an imperfective value.

3. *Conclusions*

To sum up, at least in the light of the analysis of the examples used by Li himself, it does not seem to be possible to conclude that t-stem participles are limited, in the Aramaic of the Book of Daniel, to the expression of passive and reflexive meanings. On the contrary, it would seem opportune to introduce, for this morphological category, the concept of middle voice. The great majority of the t-participles that Li classifies as passive, and also many of those that the author considers reflexive (such as 6.4 *mtnṣḥ* 'excelling', 6.12 *mtḥnn* 'praying', 6.15 *mštdr* 'to struggle' etc.), appear to describe states of mind, emotions, conditions of the subject and other events that belong to the semantic area of middle.

Finally, as far as the aspectual value is concerned, the hypothesis that t-stem participles have an imperfective value has to be rejected on the basis of the evidence given by Li.

Bibliography

BERTINETTO, Pier Marco (1986). Tempo, aspetto e azione nel verbo italiano. Il sistema dell'indicativo. Firenze.

GOLDENBERG, Gideon (1992). Aramaic Perfects. *Israel Oriental Studies,* 12.

KEMMER, Suzanne (1993). *The Middle Voice.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

LI, Tarsee (2008). Non-Active Participles in the Aramaic of Daniel. *Aramaic Studies,* 6 (1), 111-136.

NÖLDEKE, Theodor (1898 (repr. 1966)). *Kurzgefasste Syrische Grammatik.* Darmstadt.

SHIBATANI, Masayoshi (1988), *Passive and Voice*, TSL 16, Amsterdam.