Some remarks on the use of *et*-stems and internal passives in the Book of the Laws of the Countries

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1. Introduction

The Book of the Laws of the Countries (or Dialogue on Fate) is a Syriac text, composed by a disciple of Bardaisan (II-III century A.D.). The topic of the text is a confutation of the theory that man's life, attitude and destiny are governed by Fate (Syr. *ḥelqå*). The author reports a dialogue between Bardaisan and his disciples, in which the wise man analyses uses and habits of various peoples of the world. The aim of the overview is to show that man's behaviour is determined by the laws and conventions of his own land and people, and not by the positions of the stars, or by the destiny. Nature and Fate have an influence on vital functions and on some aspect of life, but man's free will and the uses of the various communities are responsible for man's actions[1].

In this paper I will examine the use of all the *et*- stems and all the internal passives occurring in the Book of the Laws of the Countries, with respect to their syntactic behaviour and their semantic value, as far as Voice, Aspect and Actionality are concerned.

Roughly speaking, *et*- prefix is a derivational element through which, in Syriac, medio-passive stems are built, from other basic and derived stems with active value. Forms built by means of the *et*- prefix will be referred to as *t-forms* in this paper.

Internal passive, on the other hand, is a formation in which stative/passive meaning is conveyed by a specific vowel pattern. In Syriac this type of formation is limited to the participles of some basic and derived stems, and is no longer productive for the rest of the verbal paradigm[2]. In this paper the expression *internal passive* will be used mainly to refer to a *morphological category*, without implications from the semantic point of view. On the contrary, it will be argued that this class (and especially the pattern *ktîb*) is more specifically correlated with the expression of *stative* values, rather than passive *stricto sensu*.

I have, so far, used terms such as medio-passive and passive, to refer to the semantic value of the verbal stems here taken into account. Such a terminology is rather approximate, and does not always correspond to the actual value of the single verbal form. Moreover, the semantic correlation between the basic stems and the derived *et*-stems is not always clear, and does not seem to be the same for all verbal roots.

For this reason, it seems necessary to reconsider the functions and meanings of these verbal stems in the light of modern linguistic theories.

For middle voice, I will refer to the classical study by (Kemmer 1993), but also to the works

on Indoeuropean languages, such as (Kulikov 1999), (Kulikov 2006), (Kulikov 2007a), (Kulikov 2007b), (Lazzeroni 1990), (Lazzeroni 2004) and (Romagno 2002). I will also make reference to the *Théorie Actancielle*, more precisely to the works by Bossong and other scholars, included in (Feuillet 1998). The most important idea to be derived from (Kemmer 1993), which constitutes the necessary condition for the study presented here, is that of a clear distinction between reflexivity and middle semantic.

As regards Aspect and Actionality, I will refer mostly to the framework built in the course of time by Bertinetto, as exposed in (Bertinetto 1986), (Bertinetto, Higginbotham & Squartini, 1995), (Bertinetto 1997) among others.

The results presented here, are part of a broader analysis of the functions of the *et*-stems, and of their correlation with middle voice, which constitute the topic of my PhD dissertation.

2. Methodology of the analysis

In my analysis I have examined all the *et*-stems occurring in the Book of the Laws of the Countries. I have also taken into account the internal passives, but only when they appeared to have a verbal function: I have left aside all the participles that are listed autonomously as adjectives in the (Payne Smith 1903), and the participles that were used as mere adjectives in the context.

In a first phase of the work, I have examined the value of the forms in terms of voice: I have tried to classify them as active, passive, middle, reflexive. As far as reflexive and middle are concerned, I have also tried to specify the semantic areas to which they referred, according to the classification given in (Kemmer 1993) (with some modifications that I will discuss further on in this paper). As regards reflexive and middle markers, Syriac is here considered as having (at least) two distinct forms. Moreover, it is not possible to isolate a single reflexive marker, as required by Kemmer[3]. Nevertheless, it is possible to individuate a class of structures, involving a substantive meaning 'soul', 'body' or a body part and a pronominal suffix, that express reflexivity[4].

The semantic categories used in this analysis are based on the *Checklist for Middle Semantics* given in *Appendix A* of (Kemmer 1993)[5]. Such a checklist is quite complex and articulated, I will here recall only the main groups[6]:

1. Emphatic domain
2. Reflexive (and related middle) situations
3. Reciprocal domain
4. (Middle) passive
5. Impersonal
6. Facilitative
7. Grooming
8. Non-translational motion
9. Change of body posture
10. Other body actions
11. Translational motion
12. Positionals
13. Emotion middle
14. Cognition middle
15. Perception middle
16. Spontaneous events

[3]Cf. the definition given in (Kemmer 1993: 47): "A reflexive marker is a productive grammatical device that is used obligatorily to mark direct reflexive contexts in at least the third person".
[4]For an attempt of classification of the reflexive and middle markers of Syriac, cf. Farina (forthcoming), 'L'espressione del medio in ebraico biblico e siriaco', *in Atti del XXXII convegno della Società Italiana di Glottologia, Verona 25-27 ottobre 2007*.
[5](Kemmer 1993: 267-270).
[6]Reference to some sub-classes will be made in the following paragraph.

The second part of the research has been devoted to the aspectual and actional values of the verbal forms[7]. I have examined the value of the *et*-stems and of the internal passives within their context, and I have confronted it with the value of their corresponding active basic stems[8]. The aim of this analysis is to find out whether there are special correlation between *t*-forms and internal passives on one hand, and some aspectual and actional properties on the other.

The reference works for the classification have been mainly (Bertinetto 1986), (Bertinetto, Higginbotham & Squartini, 1995) and (Bertinetto 1997), but reference has been made also to (Comrie 1976), (Cohen 1989) and (Vendler 1957 [1967]).

As regards the Aspect, the following classification, according to (Bertinetto 1997) has been used:

PERFECTIVE/TERMINATIVE	IMPERFECTIVE/NON-TERMINATIVE
A. AORISTIC	A. PROGRESSIVE
B. PERFECT	B. CONTINUOUS
	C. HABITUAL

The terms Terminative and Non-Terminative have been preferred to the more conventional Perfective and Imperfective, following the suggestion given in (Bertinetto 1997). This terminology seems more appropriate for Semitic languages, where scholarly tradition has established terms as imperfect, imperfective, perfect and perfective for the denomination of the verbal 'tenses'. Using Terminative and Non-Terminative for aspectual distinctions, it is possible to avoid confusion with the traditional names of the 'tenses' or verbal conjugations. It is also important to notice that the term *Perfect* in the table given above, has aspectual meaning (is used to indicate an action viewed as concluded, but the effects of which are still relevant at the speech time[9]), and has to be kept distinct from the perfect tense, namely the Syriac suffix conjugation.

For Actionality, I have classified verbal forms according to the following scheme[10]:

STATES	[+ durative]	-telic]	[+stative]
ACTIVITIES	[+durative]	[-telic]	[-stative]
ACCOMPLISHMENTS	[+durative]	[+telic]	[-stative]
GRADUAL COMPLETION VERBS	[+durative]	[>telic]	[-stative]
ACHIEVEMENTS	[-durative]	[+telic]	[-stative]

Of course, more subtle distinctions are possible and in some cases relevant, but for a first overview the categories listed above are sufficient, and easier to handle.

From (Bertinetto & Squartini, 1995) I have derived the category of *gradual completion*

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[7] The forms analysed have been the same for both phases of the study.

[8] For the et-stems related to derived stems (such as *etpa''al*, *ettap'al* etc.), the reference point has been the corresponding derived stem (namely *pa''el*, *ap'el* etc.).

[9] Cf. (Reichenbach 1947 [1966]) and (Bertinetto 1986).

[10] For a complete discussion of which cf. (Bertinetto 1986) and (Bertinetto & Squartini, 1995), among others.

verbs, namely verbs that indicate a gradual approach to a goal, that is more or less determined and fixed, according to the pragmatic context. These verbs, as shown by (Bertinetto & Squartini, 1995), are a subclass of accomplishments, although they have a hybrid behaviour with respect to a number of features.

This category proves to be particularly appropriate for a number of derived stems from stative bases indicating a quality or a condition: the derived stems sometimes seem to indicate that the subject gradually assumes such a condition. Moreover this seems to apply also to some active causative verbs.

3. Voice

I present here the results of the analysis of the semantic values of the *t*-forms and of the internal passives, according to the criteria of classification given in (Kemmer 1993).

It is first of all important to remark that the data here given are *tokens*. They can give a general idea of the distribution of the semantic functions of the *t*- prefix and of the internal passive. The number of roots (96), represented in the forms taken into account, is big enough for the analysis to be meaningful. Nevertheless, in some instances, the higher or lower frequency of a given verbal root can influence the results. This is the case, for example, for *sîm* 'put, placed', the 'passive' participle of the verb *sûm* 'to put, place', that occurs very frequently in the text, almost always with a stative function.

The verbal forms have been given a label M (middle) / P (passive) / I (impersonal), according to their semantic value and syntactical function. Moreover, the forms classified as M have been fit into the 16 categories listed in § 2, with some adjustment.

It is also important to notice that passive, middle and reflexive are being here considered as a scalar categories, each of them constituted by a nucleus of prototypical instances, around which are distributed the less prototypical values. The extreme ends of each category are connected, the classification of the more peripheral values can vary according to the context.

Passive domain is thus viewed as a continuum, within which it is possible define a core area and a periphery. As far as morphosyntax is concerned, I have distinguished between a stronger and a weaker passive structure. The stronger type represents the prototype of passive, whereas weaker structures distribute all around, according to their decreasing resemblance to the core[11].

Semitic languages have a tendency to leave the agent of a passive verb unexpressed. In Syriac, therefore, the expression of the agent, although possible, is relatively rare. I have considered as strong passives, the forms inserted in a structure involving also an agent, an instrument or a cause, expressed by means of the prepositions *men-*, *b-*, *l-*, such as 32.4 *metnatpînan b-hen* 'we are dragged by them'.

On the other hand, I have classified as weak passives the forms in which the meaning of the root, the semantic and the syntactical context necessarily imply that the subject has lower control on, or undergoes the action described, but no agent is openly indicated. This latter category I have considered to better correspond to the group 4 (middle-passive) of Kemmer's classification. Nevertheless, also within this weaker passives, there appears to be a scalar variation, with different degrees of 'passivity'. For example, in 46.15 *metqaṭlå* 'killed' implies certainly a higher degree of passivity, with respect to 46.12 *metîldan* 'generated' or to 30.4 *metḥazyå* 'seen/appeared'. For this reason it is also not always easy to decide whether a verb

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[11] For this concept cf. among others (Fici Giusti 1998), (Lazzeroni 2004), (Romagno 2002), (Cennamo 1998).

has to be considered as a weak passive or, in stead, a spontaneous event (of the type 16). It depends on the way the event is presented by the writer. For example, in this text I have chosen to classify the *t-* form of *îled* as a middle form and as a spontaneous event and not as a passive, because the involvement of an agent is never taken into account. On the contrary, the generation of human beings is mentioned only as a natural event, a first step in the biological history of individuals, analogous to growth and death.

In the next page follow the results of the analysis.

	T- FORMS	INTERNAL PASSIVES
tot	221	76
M	144	44
P	85	33
M/P	9	1
I	1	-

Table 1 - General distribution.

CLASS	T- FORMS	INTERNAL PASSIVES
passive + agent	15	8
self control	30	3
readiness	1	-
self preservation	1	-
guilty	4	-
2 (indirect middle)	4	2
3 (reciprocal)	9	2
3 (group action)	9	-
4 (weak passive)	69[12]	25[13]
5	1	-
7	3	2
8	3	-
11	6[14]	-
12	3	26
13	9	6
14	15	1
15	1	-
16	58[15]	6[16]

Table 2 - sub-classes.

The categories individuated by Kemmer seem to apply also to Syriac verbal system. Beside elements related to some of the 16 main classes, instances of *t-* forms and internal passives,

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[12] Of which one could also be classified as 11, three also as 16.
[13] Of which one could also be classified as 16.
[14] Cf. n. 10.
[15] Cf. n. 10.
[16] Cf. n. 11.

expressing self control, readiness and self preservation, have also been found[17]. It is noteworthy that all the instances both of *t*-forms and of internal passives could be fit into one of Kemmer's classes, with only one exception[18].

T-forms show a clear predominance of the middle values on the passive ones (144 vs 85 forms, out of 221). This predominance is even stronger considering that 69 passive forms out of 85 are weak passives, of those that can be considered as peripheral members of the category of middle.

As regards internal passives, the predominance of middle values is weaker: 44 *vs* 33 forms. The data presented are *tokens*[19], therefore the amount of internal passives with weak passive value could be slightly reduced. Finally, the proportion of real passives, within the more general category of passive, is higher for internal passives, as compared with to *t*-forms.

Let us now consider some details of the classification.

The great majority of *t*-forms (about 31%) rank as weak passives. They also significantly prevail on internal passives in this function.

The second major group of *t*-forms (about 26%) is represented by spontaeous events. This is partly due to the fact that this category, as defined by Kemmer, covers a quite large semantic spectrum. It is nevertheless important to notice that most of the meanings included in this category, refer to events that the subject experiences or undergoes, without the intervention of external agents. More precisely, an external agent, although sometimes required for the event to take place, is not taken into account in the description of the action[20]. Therefore, this class has important affinities with the weak passives, to the extent that, sometimes, it is difficult to chose between the two values. This is the case, for example, for verbs meaning 'to cease', but also 'to be made cease', or 'to be born', namely 'to be generated' etc. Again, there are not many internal passives belonging to this category.

As has already been reminded, the content of the text has also an influence on the interpretation of the verbal forms here analyzed. A given event can be presented by the author as spontaneous, in order to support the thesis that fate has no power on it, and therefore can be classified as purely middle. Nevertheless, in a different context, the very same structure, referring to the very same event, can be viewed as depending, for example, on God's will, and therefore described with a form that has to be implicitly considered as a weak passive.

The third major class of *t*-forms (about 15%) expresses values related to the semantic area of self-control, readiness and self-protection. These are areas from which, according to (Kemmer 1993): 270, a middle category can develop, from a reflexive source. In this case it is again important to remind that the data are *tokens*, because a great number of *t*-forms in this group are from the same verbal root *dbr* 'to lead a life, to behave'.

Emotion and cognition middle rank around 4% and 7%, respectively.

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[17] These values are listed by (Kemmer 1993:270) among "Verb meanings attested with light marking in two-form languages, and/or which are reflexive in one-form languages. These may be a starting point for development of middle-system from a reflexive source".

[18] The verb *hûb*, in the *etp'el* stem means 'to be (found) guilty; in the *etpa''al*, means 'to be guilty / to be condemned'. In the Book of the Laws of the Countries it is used four times with the meaning of 'to be guilty'. This value does not fit easily in any of the major categories given by (Kemmer 1993: 267-270).

[19] A relevant number of internal passives are forms of the same root, *sûm*.

[20] The sub-classes of this category are numerous. I will briefly indicate some, taken from the list in (Kemmer 1993:269-270): motion (rock, drop, rotate...), change of state (fall, sink, approach, spread out, recede...), position (hang, float...), spontaneous events associated with animate beings (die, be born, grow, become + state...), spontaneous events associated with inanimate beings (change of position, of shape, partial or global disruption, existential change/denaturement...).

The real passives represent about 7% of the total.

Finally, the indirect middle and reciprocal, together representing functions more closely related to those of the real reflexives, are about 10%.

Internal passives show a fairly different distribution. The two major categories into which they are subdivided are positionals and weak passives, both around 32%. Although a relevant amount of positionals is constituted by forms of the same root *sûm*, this result is quite relevant, if compared with the number of *t*-forms of the same class: only 3 out of 221, just above the 1%. I believe that it can be reasonably argued that positionals are one of the most representative categories of internal passives, those that are closer to the core function of this morphological category.

Real passives are over 10% of the total of internal passives.

Indirect middle and reciprocal all together represent the 5%, whereas all the values related to self protection are absent.

If one had to distribute along a continuum the classes of *t*-forms and internal passives, found in the Book of the Laws of the Countries, one would get the following representation:
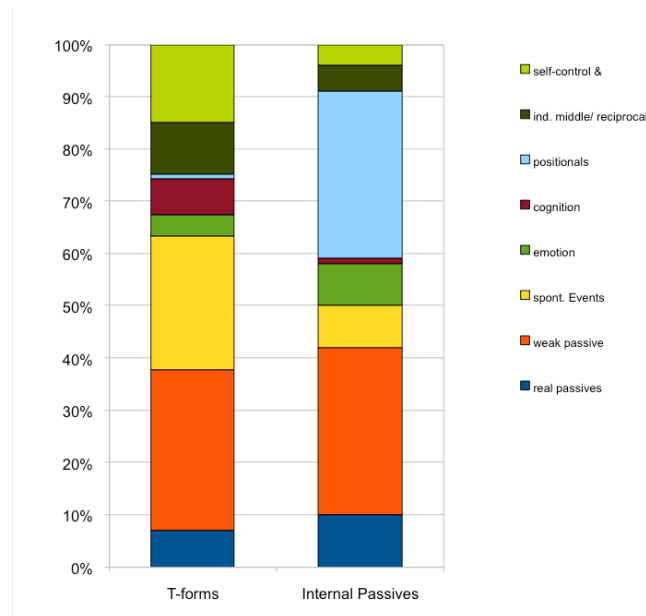
Of course, these data are only significant on a larger scale and can give but a rough impression of the situation. Nevertheless, if compared also with the results of the analysis presented in next paragraph, they can contribute to build a picture of the functions of Syriac *t*-forms and internal passives.

4. Aspect

In § 2 I the criteria for the aspectual analysis have been described. I will here present the results.

Terminative	64	29%	Non-Terminative	154	70%	unknown	3
Perfect	46	20%	Gnomic	96	43%		
Aorist	18	8%	Continuous	30	13%		
			Progressive	14	6%		
			habitual	10	4%		
			ambiguous[21]	4	2%		

Table 3- Aspectual values of *t*-forms

The unknown values correspond to infinitives, the aspectual value of which could not be determined.

From Table 3 it appears that Non-Terminative Aspect is by far the most represented among *t*-forms. This depends to a great extent on the abundance of forms with *Gnomic* value, that alone represent the 43% of all the *t*-forms found in the Book of the Laws of the Countries. This is, of course, due to the nature of the text itself, conceived as a description of laws and uses of various peoples of the world, and, therefore, rich in general statements and metachronic expressions[22].

Nevertheless, the most represented aspectual value for *t*-forms is that of Perfect (46% of all instances).

Finally, table 4 presents the aspectual values of internal passives in the Book of the Laws of the Countries. Here the predominance of the Non-Terminative aspect is weaker, and the presence of the Gnomic aspect is limited. Continuous and Perfect aspects are more or less equally represented (35% and 32 %, respectively).

Terminative	27/28	35%	Non-terminative	50/51	65%	unknown	1
Perfect	25	32%	Gnomic	19	25%	ambiguous[23]	1
Aorist	2	2,6%	Continuous	27	35%		
			Progressive	2	2,6%		
			Habitual	2	2,6%		

Table 4 - Aspectual values of internal passives

5. Actionality

As already mentioned in § 2, the aim of the analysis, as regards Actionality, is to individuate possible correlations between *t*-forms and internal passives and some actional features. More specifically, as far as *t*-forms are concerned, given the correlation with middle semantics that was shown in § 3, a certain connection with telicity could be hypothesized.

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[21]Two of these form can be interpreted either as gnomic or as progressive; other two either as gnomic or continuous.

[22]A comparison with a similar analysis, conducted on a narrative text, would be very interesting and would probably lead to different results.

[23]In this case (28, 11) the ambiguity is between perfect and continuous interpretation.

This is, nevertheless, not the case, as shown in the table and in the chart below:

BASIC STEM[24]		T-FORM	
achievement	126	achievement	108
accomplishment	30 +	accomplishment	19 +
grad. compl.	11	grad. compl.	1
state	41	state	58
activity	65	activity	35
ambiguous		ambiguous	
achievement/ accomplishment	15	achievement/ accomplishment	1
achievement/ grad. compl.	9		
achievement/ activity	14		
achievement/state	4		
state/activity	9		

Table 5 – Actional values for *t*-forms
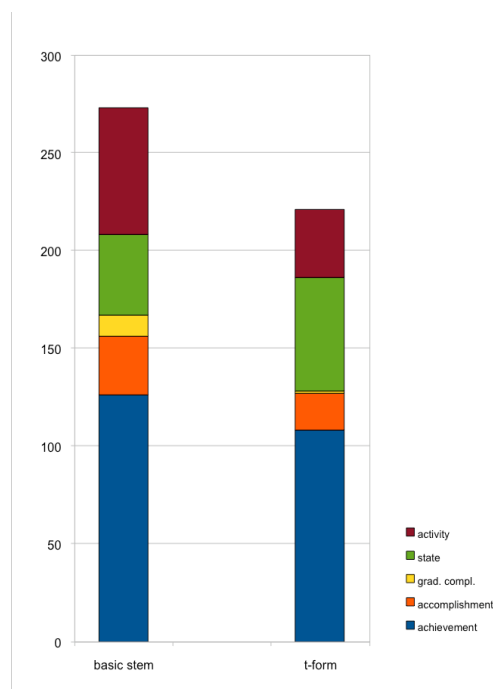
As can be seen from Table 5, the amount of ambiguous cases is quite relevant. This means that the representation in the chart is not entirely reliable, and can give but a rough image of the distribution of the values. As regards the ambiguity between achievement and gradual completion verbs, it means that the basic stem can be interpreted both ways according to the context. The same verbal root can describe a given event either as telic or as subdivided in a number of intermediate stages. For example, the same verb can mean both 'to become (very) fat' and 'to fatten'. Such an alternation (that can be seen also as the possibility of restoring a fully telic value of accomplishment or achievement, from a gradual completion one) is typical of the class of gradual completion verbs, as described in (Bertinetto & Squartini, 1995:14).

The ambiguities found in the analysis regard mainly the actional values of the basic stems, and not so much those of the *t*-forms. Moreover, a part from the uncertainty between achievement and activity and between achievement and state, all other ambiguities do not regard telicity, but other semantic properties of the verb. For this reason, it can be worthwhile to compare the actional values of the basic stems with the ones of the corresponding *t*-forms.

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[24]When the *t*-form in the text is the corresponding of a derived stem (such as *etpa''al* from *pa''el),* the value of the latter has been taken as reference point.

MODIFICATIONS	
+ telic	22
- telic	32
+ durative	-
- durative	3
+ state	10
- state	8
unchanged	146

Table 6 – Modifications
of values for *t*-forms

The great majority (66%) of the *t*-forms leaves the actional value of the basic stem unchanged. In the 14% of instances the *t*-forms looses telicity, with respect to the basic stem. 80% of such cases has Continuous or Gnomic aspectual value. Only in the 10% of occurrences the *t*-form is telicized, with respect to the basic stem

Another interesting fact regards the class of *gradual completion* verbs[25]. All but one[26] of the verbs that allow in the basic stem an interpretation as gradual completion verbs, loose this possibility in the *t*-stem.

The picture is quite different for internal passives.

BASIC STEM		INTERNAL PASSIVE	
achievement	48	achievement	23
accomplishment	5	accomplishment	3
grad. compl.	0	grad. compl.	0
state	15	state	55
activity	14	activity	1
ambiguous		ambiguous	
achievement/ accomplishment	2	achievement/ accomplishment	5
achievement/ activity	2		
state/activity	2		

Table 7 – Actional values of internal passives
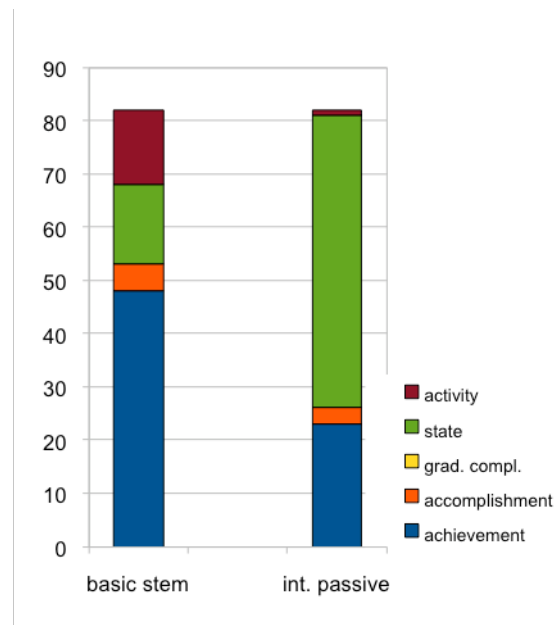
Here the amount of ambiguous cases is much more limited. The class of gradual completion verbs is here totally absent. 42% of the verbs keeps the same actional value, both in the basic stem and in the internal passive. A slightly higher percentage (44%) is detelicized. This is particularly significant, if one considers that all of the occurrences classified as [- telic] are

[25] Cf. § 2.

[26] 22,05 *kyåneh d-barnåšå hånaw. d-netîled wnetrabbê* 'the nature of man is this: to be born and to grow up'. The verb *rbå* in the basic stem means 'to grow, to grow up, to increase'; here, in the *etpaˈˈal* 'to grow up, grow older'.

actually also [+ state]: they correspond to a basic achievement or accomplishment that has become a state in the internal passive.

This result combines well with the one of the semantic classification of internal passives described in § 3. They are to a great extent positionals, describing a state.

Moreover, these data are consistent with the traditional interpretation of the Syriac pattern *ktîb* (and, more in general, of the North-West Semitic patterns *qatil/qatul*) as having a *stative* value, for intransitive verbal roots, beside the (later) function of passive of a transitive verb[27].

6. Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to account for the uses and functions of two Syriac verbal stems, *t*-forms and internal passives, as they are used in the Book of the Laws of the Countries (III cent. A.D.).

My hypothesis was that it would be possible to relate the values of such stems to middle voice.

The reference points for verifying such an hypothesis have been, on the one hand the semantic classification given by (Kemmer 1993) and, on the other hand, a number of studies on Aspect and Actionality and on their correlation with middle voice.

As far as the semantic classification is concerned, both for *t*-forms and internal passives, the most represented category is that of 'weak passives', namely of passives not followed by an agent syntactically expressed. *T*-forms are also very often used to express *spontaneous events*, that is events that the subject somehow experiences or undergoes, but causer of agent of which is not viewed as relevant for the process. This category is contiguous to the one of 'weak passives', with which it shares a number of features. Internal passives, on the other hand, reveal a strong preference for the class of *positionals*, that is just as represented as that of 'weak passives', and that is almost completely absent among *t*-forms.

This behaviour of internal passives is confirmed also by the Actional analysis: this stem has in the great majority of cases (70%) the actional value of *state*, and in 44% of cases turns into state the value of the basic stem.

It is more difficult to determine the function of the *t*-forms with respect to Actionality. For this stem it does not seem to be possible to indicate a stronger preference. In 66% of occurrences it leaves the value of the basic stem unchanged, whatever it is. There seems to be a predominance of achievements, and this can be related to the great number of terminative forms, revealed by the aspectual analysis.

As regards Aspect, the Book of the Laws of the Countries, for its nature of doctrinal text, has a great number of forms with gnomic value, expressing absolute statements. For this reason, the picture of the aspectual distribution of forms is slightly distorted. Nevertheless, one can still notice that *t*-forms have often a terminative value, almost always that of a perfect.

Internal passives, on the contrary, are mainly non-terminative, and, more precisely, have a continuous value, which is consistent with their tendency to indicate a *state*.

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[27] Cf. the brilliant study by (Joüon 1930).

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