The paradox of cyclicity in Syriac

Dominique Stephan Bobeck, Universität Leipzig, dom.bobeck@gmail.com

Syriac (Semitic, Aramaic) is characterised by post-vocalic spirantisation and the deletion of unstressed vowels (Nöldeke 1880, Edzard 2001). Note that vowel deletion counterbleeds spirantisation with the consequence of overapplication. The impact of these processes on the verbal system can be seen in Table 1, which shows the past tense paradigm of the base /katab/ 'write' with and without the object agreement suffix *-(aː)x* '2SG.M'. In Table 1, it becomes clear that the original vowels of the base *katab-* reappear if it is concatenated with V(ː)C-shaped suffixes within a single phonological cycle, cf. /katab+uː+x/ → [kaθvuːx], not *[keθbuːx]. However, how can *keθbaθ* (3SG.F) and *keθbeθ* (1SG.C) be explained? Should not /katab+aθ/ yield *[kaθbaθ]? Why can [a] surface in *kaθvuːx* but not in *keθbaθ*?

Table 1. Past tense in Syriac (with and without object agreement 2SG.M)

	sg.	**sg. (+ 2SG.M)**	**pl.**	**pl. (+ 2SG.M)**
3m	*kθav*	*kaθv-aːx*	*kθav*	*kaθv-uː-x*
3f	*keθb-aθ*	*kθav-θ-aːx*	*kθav*	*kaθv-aː-x*
2m	*kθav-t*	-	*kθav-toːn*	-
1c	*keθb-eθ*	*kθav-t-aːx*	*kθav-n*	*kθav-naː-x*

I assume that complex codas are repaired by epenthetic *e* (Beyer 1984: 112–145; Knudsen 2015: 137–158), and apparent counterexamples to this generalisation, such as *kθavt* 'you (m.) wrote', do not need epenthesis since there is no complex coda at this cycle (/katab+taː/ → kaˈθavta → [kθavt]). While this explains the second *e* in *keθbeθ*, there are still two problems: the identity of the first vowel in *keθbaθ/keθbeθ* and the absence of spirantisation. Since both forms contain a vowel preceding /b/ in the input, [v] would be predicted (as in /katab+uː+x/ → [kaθvuːx]). It seems that the third root consonant does not have access to the original input and, hence, is only sensitive to the output form. This means *b* appears to be the outcome of a parallel evaluation. However, this stands in contrast to *e* in the first syllable, which can only be accounted for by cyclicity due to diachronic reanalysis. The older base *katab-* has been replaced by *k(ə)θav-*. In other Late Aramaic varieties, *k(ə)θav-* is the usual surface form, including the 1SG.C/3SG.F (Bar-Asher Siegal 2013; Dalman 1894). Since *k(ə)θav-* is present in all cells of the paradigm of these Aramaic varieties and probably Proto-Syriac, the actual base was unclear to the learner. Eventually, the more surface-oriented form *k(ə)θav-* became prevalent for the 1SG.C/3SG.F, triggering a phonological cycle and creating the stem allomorph /kθav/ alongside default /katab/. While this did not cause any change in other Aramaic languages, it created an ungrammatical consonant cluster and epenthesis in Syriac: **CCaCáθ* > **CCCáθ* > **CeCCáθ* (Beyer 1984: 145f). This would predict **keθvaθ/*keθveθ*, cf. Biblical Aramaic *kiθvaθ/kiθveθ* (Rosenthal 1961: 43). How can we account for cyclically derived syllable structure but also parallel spirantisation? The answer is that parallel evaluation is an illusion and a result of more complex exponents, i.e. *-aθ* and *-t* plus floating [−continuant], which changes stem-final consonants back into stops. So, Syriac constitutes a morphophonological case of the Duke-of-York gambit (Pullum 1976). Cyclic phonology causes deletion, epenthesis, and spirantisation; but at the same time, fricatives (first derived from stops) reconvert into stops. In sum, reanalysis of the stem has led to a further cycle in the derivation of *keθbaθ* and *keθbaθ*. However, analogy to the root consonants gave rise to floating features in the respective agreement suffixes.