XII Incontro Italiano di Linguistica Camito-semitica
(Afroasiatica)

ATTI
a cura di Marco Moriggi

Rubbettino
2007
H. Satzinger

Absolute state and absolutive case in Afro-Asiatic

In the past decades the idea has spread that the Afro-Asiatic ancestor language was originally of the ergative type. This view is based on the observation of some features of various individual languages and/or several branches that seemed to offer themselves to such an interpretation¹. For Berber, A. Aikhen-


functions. (Hence, this emphatic state of Biblical Aramaic is the equivalent of definite article + noun in Hebrew: Hebrew bad-dāḥār ~ Aramaic millūt-ā, Hebrew hab-bāyit ~ Aramaic bāyit-ā, Hebrew ham-malkāh ~ Aramaic malkūt-ā.) It looses, though, this function of a marker of definiteness in the later stages of the language and becomes the normal form of the noun: malkā «the king», «a king». By this development (reminiscent of that of the Berber noun, whose general gender/number prefixes are also thought to go back to a definite article) we are left with the absolute state (melek < *malk-) in all syntactic situations other than nominative (subject), accusative (object), or genitive (after nouns and prepositions): i.e., in predicate function, in vocative function, etc. In this way, the function of the Syriac absolute state comes close to the absolute state of Akkadian.

The Akkadian absolute state has the form of a “bare noun”, it shows neither declension nor mimiation: šar «king», as opposed to šarryn, šarrim, šarram. It is regarded to be identical with the third person forms of the stative. Feminine nouns end in -at: šarrat «queen»; «she is queen». Plural and dual forms are mainly attested in the stative: pl. m. -ū, f. ā; du. m. -ā, f. -ā̄.

As the absolute state does not show any case morphs we may expect it to be used for roles other than those of the arguments of the verb (as the nominative and accusative) and the expansion of noun and preposition (as the genitive). Actually, this is obvious for many of its uses:

- Predicative. In Akkadian this role coincides with the stative: šar «(he) is king»; Aramaic ‘al-malkā tab «it is o.k. with the king».
- Vocative. Akkadian šar «king!»
- Distributive repetitions, Akkadian a-na ma-a-at ma-a-at.ma «for every country».
- Idiomatic pairs of nouns, Akkadian gešer rabi «little (and) big».
- Certain specifications of place or time, etc.
- Numbers, Akkadian ištēn «one», Syriac bāt «one»; Akkadian šālaš šāt qēmum «three shut flour»; Syriac lōlō yrēn «three months»; the tens in Akkadian, Ge’ez and Epigraphic South Arabian. Also for words meaning «all», «many», «few».
- In certain expressions, after prepositions, Akkadian ana ḏār «for ever»; Syriac ba-ḡal «in haste».

8 But see also W. von Soden, Die Zahlen 20-90 im Semitischen und der Status absolutus, in «Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes» 57, 1961, pp. 24-28 for a few non-verbal instances of pl. f. ā, before a suffix pronoun: āt-.
9 Ibidem.
Under many of these conditions, English would make use of the "bare noun". Now Akkadian is a language with declension, without any articles, whereas English has no declension, though both a definite and an indefinite article. Syriac has no declension, nor has it (anymore) a definite article, nor an indefinite one. It has, though, a marker of the non-bare noun, i.e., of nouns used as subjects, objects, genitives, etc., corresponding to declension (and mimation) in Akkadian.

The definition of "bare noun" depends on the type of the language to which it is applied: bare of articles? bare of declension? etc. Linguistic studies have examined the bare noun, apart from English, in all types of languages, e.g. in Hebrew, in Turkish, even in Chinese and Japanese\(^\text{11}\), which have neither declension, nor articles, nor anything like the Syriac \(\tilde{\alpha}\) morpheme. Another language that can be compared with Akkadian and Syriac in respect to the absolute state or bare noun, is Late Egyptian (the informal language of the Ramesside period). The situation of this idiom is similar to that of English: it has no declension, although it has both definite and indefinite articles. The bare noun (more recent grammars use to call it the noun with zero article) is found, inter alia, under the following conditions\(^\text{12}\): predicative expressions, indications of time, idiomatic expressions. A particular feature of the Late Egyptian bare noun is its use in partitive expressions, viz. in respect to indefinite quantities, such as \(j.w.f\ (hr)\ \ djt\ n.j\ \ 'e\ w\ \ h\ n\ k\ t\ \ «\ and\ he\ gave\ me\ bread\ (\ 'e\ w)\ \ and\ beer\ (h\ n\ k\ t)»\) and subject and object expressions in negative sentences, unless of definite meaning.

The bare noun and the characteristic conditions in its employment are a typological feature; it has nothing to do with genetic relationship. In Akkadian it is probably old, inherited from Proto-Afro-Asiatic. In Syriac, however, it developed only after the morpheme \(\tilde{\alpha}\) had lost its role of a definiteness marker.

---

\(^{11}\) Cfr. H. Rullmann, A. You, General Number and the Semantics and Pragmatics of Indefinite Bare Nouns in Mandarin Chinese, in www.ucalgary.ca/~rullmann/Bare%20Nouns%20in%20Mandarin%20(2003).pdf: «Like many other languages, Mandarin Chinese has noun phrases consisting of just a bare noun without any functional elements such as determiners, classifiers, or number morphemes». H. Bliss, The Semantics of the Bare Noun in Turkish, in http://www.ucalgary.ca/lingcpl/volume25_1.html: “The goal of this paper is to investigate the semantic properties of the bare noun in Turkish. In this paper, the term bare noun refers to a noun phrase that consists only of a noun, without any modifying elements such as determiners, number marking, or case marking. The main argument of this thesis is that the bare noun is unique as compared to all other types of noun phrases in Turkish. As will be illustrated, it is the only NP that is not specified for number, and it is the only NP that is obligatorily non-specific”. E. Doron, Bare Singular Reference to Kinds, in www.atar.msc.dcu.ac.uk/~english/IATL/19/Doron.pdf: «Bare singular reference to kinds is allowed in Hebrew... in contrast to English, which does not allow singular indefinites to denote kinds... At the level of ordinary objects... bare singulars in Hebrew seem to parallel indefinite singulars in English...» (Introduction).

In Egyptian, there could be a bare noun only after the definite and indefinite articles had emerged.

In a number of Cushitic languages Sasse\textsuperscript{13} has distinguished an Absolute Case, and a Subject Case, and he has pointed to corresponding features in Berber, with its Absolute and Annexed States, as the traditional terms are.

In Berber and also in Cushitic, the absolute form encompasses the function of an accusative case (direct object case). In Semitic, on the other hand, the accusative has several functions of an absolute form (e.g., it is the form of the predicative noun of Arabic kāna and its «sisters»; under certain conditions the address appears in the accusative). A particular case is Akkadian: in this language, a formal distinction is made between the accusative case (in -a, etc.), and the absolute state (in zero). Nonetheless, «The Accusative case may probably be regarded as a functional variant of the Absolute form» (Diakonoff\textsuperscript{14}).

Above, Waltisberg has been mentioned, who reports on Semitic arguments pro ergative case and pro absolutive case. According to these data, the assumption of traces or residues of a Semitic ergative case merely rests on an equation of the nominative and the locative cases\textsuperscript{15}. The features adduced as evidence for residues of an absolutive case are, on the other hand, quite manifold\textsuperscript{16}. Most of them attest, however, to an absolute state (as sketched above), rather than an absolutive case, and have, therefore, no bearing whatsoever on the issue of the assumed Semitic ergativity. We are dealing with the following characteristic situations\textsuperscript{17}.

- Quotations\textsuperscript{18}. The existence of a specific quotation form is not a feature of an Ergative-Absolutive case system. Lipiński’s statement, «The existence of an ‘absolute’ form or citation form of the noun is a characteristic of ergative languages»\textsuperscript{19} is definitely wrong. An absolute form with the function of, inter

\textsuperscript{13} H.J. Sasse, Case in Cushitic, Semitic and Berber, cit.
\textsuperscript{14} I. M. Diakonoff, Semito-Hamitic Languages, cit., p. 58.
\textsuperscript{15} M. Waltisberg, Zur Ergativhypothese, cit., pp. 21-22 (§ 2.1).
\textsuperscript{16} Ivi, pp. 22-34 (§ 2.2).
\textsuperscript{18} M. Waltisberg, Zur Ergativhypothese, cit., pp. 27-29 (§ 2.6).
\textsuperscript{19} E. Lipiński, Semitic Languages, cit., p. 263 (§ 32.6).
alia, a quotation form is found in languages of a rather pure accusative-nominative type like Akkadian (form in -O) and Old Nubian (form in -a).

- Address

- Predicative form, also after thetic particles like Arabic 'imma, and after Arabic 'illa.

None of these conditions has anything to do with ergativity, or an absolute case. On the other hand, they are typical of the absolute state.

In concluding, the following may be said.

1. Many of the recent arguments pro and contra ergativity in Semitic and/or Afro-Asiatic (especially Lipiński, Tropper, Waltisberg) missed their point as they confused features of an absolute state with those of an absolute case (of an ergative system).

2. None of the attested Afro-Asiatic languages has an ergative case system - though the stative of Akkadian and Egyptian testifies to a certain measure of split ergativity: transitive verbs in the stative form are passive, more often than not (Akkadian abāz <he has been seized>; Egn. jw.f rđ.j.w n.s <he has been given to her>), intransitive verbs are by necessity active (damqāta <<you are good>>; Egn. jswt.n jī.j tā.d.tā <<our crew arrived safely>> Shipwrecked Sailor, with the stative form of jwj <<to come>> in the composite past tense form, and the stative form of tā <<to become safe>> in a clause of circumstance). Another feature is the paradigm of the personal pronoun that functions as object pronoun with transitive verbs (Arab. ' ā.taytu-bu, Egn. jw rđ.n.j sw, Ber. fki-v-t, all <<I gave it>>), but also as subject, or kind of subject, in other constructions: in Egyptian with the adjectival predicate (ndm sw <<he is pleasant>>, in various languages with thetic particles (Arab. 'imma-bu, Egn. m.k sw, Ber. bät-t, all <<here he is>>; Egn. nn sw, Ber. ulaš-t, both <<he is not, does not exist>>). But note that in no Afro-Asiatic language the respective "objective pronoun" is systematically used as subject of intransitive verbs. Nevertheless, the assumption that the proto-language had an ergative case system could account for some features of the languages.

3. As the form and function of an absolute state (marked by -a, though in Akkadian by zero) can be found in many Afro-Asiatic language families, it may be seen as an original feature of the proto-language. The Semitic accusative has obviously developed from the form of the absolute state, whereas in Berber

20 M. Waltisberg, Zur Ergativhypothese, cit., “vocative” pp. 24-25 (§ 2.2.3).
21 lvi, pp. 29-32 (§ 2.2.7).
22 lvi, pp. 25-27 (§ 2.2.5).
23 lvi, pp. 32-34 (§ 2.2.8).
and East Cushitic the absolute form is also employed for the direct object, in lieu of a proper accusative form. It is my impression that Berber and Cushitic never developed a morphological accusative case. The absolute state, on the other hand, seems to be an old, inherited feature.

[University of Vienna]