Some Remarks on the Afroasiatic Case System *)

By HELMUT SATZINGER (WIEN)

Although there is not a one-to-one relation between the cases of a language and their syntactic functions these latter are the very essence of the cases. These syntactic functions are also the basis for classifying them. From antiquity on, a distinction has been made between the ὄρθος πτώσις, the casus rectus (nominative), the vertical descent from the verbal predicate, and all the rest, the πλάγιοι πτώσεως, the casus obliqui, which remain somewhere off the direct line of descent. Another distinction is made between morphological functions, viz., in the main, of the cases of subject (nominative), direct object (accusative), and indirect object (dative), and locative functions, such as inessive, adessive, illative, elative, ablative, comitative, and also instrumental cases, etc.

Eventually, a distinction of the syntactic levels may be envisaged.
• On sentence level, cases mark the arguments of the verb, like the subject (nominative) and object (direct, accusative; indirect, dative, etc.).
• On phrase level, cases mark the nominal expansions of nouns (genitive) or prepositions.

Here, we will confine ourselves to the cases of the sentence level.

*) This study has been dedicated to the memory of the great Russian scholar Igor Mikhailovich Diakonoff and was intended as a contribution to the commemorative volume Selected Comparative-Historical Afrasian Linguistic Studies (M. Lionel Bender, Gábor Takács, David L. Appleyard, eds.). As the manuscript has for some reasons failed to reach the editors of above mentioned volume I am delighted to be able to publish it in this journal.
Among the Semitic languages, Arabic and Ga’az have preserved the case endings until the 1st millennium AD, whereas others seem to have lost them already in the 2nd millennium BC. On the sentence level, Semitic languages distinguish nominative and accusative, characteristic singular forms being marked by the endings -u and -a, respectively (in Ga’az, short u and i have generally merged – in 0 /Ø – which has led to a fusion of the forms of nominative and genitive).

In a number of Cushitic languages Sasse (1984) has distinguished an Absolute Case, and a Subject Case, and he has pointed to correspondent features in Berber, with its Absolute and Annexed States, as the traditional terms are.

The Proto East Cushitic forms are reconstructed by Sasse (1984: 117) as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Demonstratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m.</td>
<td>f.</td>
<td>m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute case:</td>
<td>*-a</td>
<td>*-a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject case:</td>
<td>*-u/i</td>
<td>*-a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Berber does not distinguish the forms by endings of the noun but rather by the vocalization of a prefixed element (Sasse 1984:121):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>f.</th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>f.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shilha</td>
<td>a-</td>
<td>ta-</td>
<td>a-slihi</td>
<td>ta-slihit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dep.:</td>
<td>u-</td>
<td>t-</td>
<td>u-slihi</td>
<td>t-slihit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘a Berber man’</td>
<td>‘a Berber woman’</td>
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<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>f.</th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>f.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tamazight</td>
<td>a-</td>
<td>ta-</td>
<td>a-mazig</td>
<td>ta-mazigt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dep.:</td>
<td>u-</td>
<td>Ø-</td>
<td>u-mazig</td>
<td>mazigt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘a Berber man’</td>
<td>‘a Berber woman’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Berber and also in Cushitic, the absolute form encompasses the function of an accusative. In Semitic, on the other hand, the accusative has several functions of an absolute form (it is the form of the predicative noun of ka’na 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). None the less, “The Accusative case may probably be regarded as a functional variant of the Absolute form” (Diakonoff 1965: 58).
NB. I do not feel at ease with terms like absolute case, or predicative case, rather I prefer absolute state. Traditionally, cases are the forms of the arguments of the predicative verb, rather than of the predicate itself. The structure of the system of Akkadian nominal morphology mirrors this clearly, showing that the absolute state is on a higher level than the cases: on the top level there is the dichotomy of absolute state vs. status rectus, and it is only in the latter that we find the category of the cases.

\[ \text{status absolutus} : \text{status rectus} \]
\[ (\text{cases}) \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>nominative</th>
<th>accusative</th>
<th>...</th>
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The characteristic uses of the absolute state in Cushitic and Berber are the following.

- The citation form.
- The address (“vocative”; partly also in Semitic).
- Nominal predicates and predicative nouns (for Semitic, cf. the use of the accusative for the predicative noun of \( \text{kānā} \) (and its “sisters”), and \( \text{kōnā} \), ‘to be’, in Arabic and \( \text{Gəz} \), respectively; and cf. use of the accusative for the predicative noun in the “absolute negation”, Arabic \( \text{la 'ilāh-a} \) ‘there is no god’).
- The focalized noun (no matter what its function is in the basic clause).
- The adverbial case (also in Semitic).
- The \text{nomen regens} of a genitive construction: Kabyle \( \text{a-fus wawgaz} (= \text{n-wawgaz}) \) ‘the hand of the man’; \( \text{Gəz}: \text{manfas-a heywat} \) ‘the breath of life’. In Akkadian, the \text{nomen regens} is in the absolute form where nominative or accusative is expected: \( \text{beł bitim} \) “the lord of the house,” for all syntactic functions.

The accusative case can be derived from the absolute state (in predicative function) under the assumption that originally the morpheme of the absolute state, \( *a \), was free and marked the predicative phrase as a whole, rather than its nucleus: \( (\text{VERB} + \text{PATIENT})_{\text{pred.}} \), rather than \( \text{VERB}_{\text{pred.}} + \text{PATIENT} \) (Satzinger 1999: 30–32).
Eventually, the marker a of the predicative phrase was reinterpreted as a marker of the object. It could be imagined that this happened in the course of a general shift from an ergative/absolutive case system to a nominative/accusative system as it was only then that the category of the direct object emerged and, in consequence, need was felt to mark it specifically. Until then it had shared its category with the subject of the intransitive verb (absolutive case).

The first to suggest that Afroasiatic was originally a language of the ergative type was Diakonoff (1965: 58). Presently this idea seems to find much sympathy (some references in Satzinger 2001).\(^1\) In addition to the arguments produced so far we can now state that also the transition from the absolute state to an accusative case (as in Semitic), and the use of the absolute form as an accusative case (in Berber and Cushitic) is best seen on the background of an original ergative system, that had then no use for an accusative. Rather, the inventory consisted:

* of an absolute state, marked by a free enclitic morpheme *a. Its realm was the citation form, the address ("vocative"), the predicate (probably not only the nominal predicate but any predicate phrase, the marker being attached to the last element), and any focalized element;

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\(^1\) A critical position is held by Waltisberg 2002; note, however, that many of his arguments seem to be directed against the reconstruction of an absolute case (or state), rather than the absolutive case of an ergative system.
• of an **absolutive case**, perhaps marked by *zero*. Its realm: the first argument of the verb, *viz.* the subject of intransitives and the patient of transitives;

• of an **ergative case**; this is probably the form that assumed nominative function when the system switched from ergativity to an accusative system. Its marker may have been an ending *-*u. Its realm was, of course, the agent expression of transitive verbs. Originally it may have been a locative case, *cf.* the relics of such a form in Semitic.2

• of a **genitive case**, marked by *-*i, and it was probably a doublet of the nisba adjective, derived from nouns (and prepositions, as particularly in Egyptian) by a similar ending (*e.g.*, in Arabic: genitive -i vs. nisba ending -iyy-);

• perhaps also of some kind of **adverbial case**, marked by **-*iš**, as in Akkadian (**"dative"**), with relics in several Semitic languages,3 and *cf.* the Egyptian "postposition" is, as in nfr is ‘like a god’; 4

• perhaps further locative or adverbial cases.

When, at a certain stage of the development, Afroasiatic switched to a nominative/accusative system, the use of the ergative case was extended to the subject of intransitive verbs. It assumed subject function, rather than agent function: it became a nominative case. The Semitic accusative originated in the absolute state in the way sketched above.

In language there is a general tendency to either substitute morphological case marking by the use of free morphemes, such as prepositions or special free case markers like Hebrew *‘at-* , or by a rigid word order (in particular, for distinguishing subject and object). This can explain the state of affairs in the individual Afroasiatic groups and languages: no case marking in Egyptian, as far as we know, nor in the Semitic languages of the younger type, *etc.* The locative cases became obsolete, or disappeared completely. In many Berber idioms and in several Cushitic languages, both the absolute form and the nominative – mainly used as subject case – were preserved.

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3 For Lipinski 2000: 267 (32.17) *-*iš is a “postposition”, rather than a case.

4 Chetverukhin 1993; Gensler 1997; Måcelaru 2003.
REFERENCES


Satzinger 2001  Helmut Satzinger, “On ergativity in Egyptian.” In: A. Zaborski (ed.), New Data and New Ma-
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Waltisberg 2002
