Case and Mood Endings in Semitic Languages –
Myth or Reality?

Désinences casuelles et modales
dans les langues sémitiques – mythe ou réalité?

Edited by / Édité par
Lutz Edzard, Manuel Sartori, Philippe Cassuto

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The opposition “nominative” vs. “absolute” case in a Semitic perspective^{*}

Lutz Edzard, University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and University of Oslo

1 Introduction

The goal of this paper is to check the validity of the concept “marked nominative” or rather the opposition between a “nominative” and an “absolute” case for a number of morpho-syntactic phenomena in Semitic, mainly Hebrew, Ga‘az, and Arabic. What motivates this approach is the relevance of the opposition “nominative” vs. “absolute” in a wider Afroasiatic perspective, notably in Berber, Cushitic, and Omotic. Instances of an “accusative” in Semitic that can be much better described in terms of an “absolute” case thus may be viewed as being inherited from an earlier Afroasiatic linguistic stage.

Generally speaking, the term “marked nominative” refers to a scenario, in which the nominative constitutes a longer or more complex, in other words “marked” form vis-à-vis the accusative.¹ In Gothic, Old Norse, and Icelandic, for instance, the nominative exhibits more morphological complexity as compared with the accusative (1):

(1) Nominative vs. accusative in Gothic, Old Norse, and Icelandic

	Nominative	Accusative	Gloss
Gothic	<i>dag-s</i>	<i>dag</i>	‘dag’
Old Norse	<i>arm-r</i>	<i>arm</i>	‘arm’
Icelandic	<i>hest-ur</i>	<i>hest</i>	‘horse’

Staying for a moment with the purely morphological aspect of the “marked nominative”, a comparable scenario is found in Harar Oromo (cf. Owens 1985: 101, 251) (2):

^{*} This paper partially builds up on material presented in Edzard 2016a/b and to appear. For valuable comments I would like to thank Na‘ama Pat-El and Michael Ahland. As always, responsibility is my own.

¹ For this basic definition cf. notably Dixon 1979.

(2) Nominative vs. accusative in Harar Oromo

- a. *sáree-n adii-n ni iyyi-t-i*
 dog-NOM white-NOM FOC bark-F-IPF
 ‘The white dog is barking.’
- b. *haat-tii okkóttée goot-t-i*
 mother-NOM pot make-F-IPF
 ‘Mother is cooking (lit. making the pot).’

Next to Cushitic and Omotic, comparable systems also obtain in Nilo-Saharan languages, thus pointing to the status of this linguistic phenomenon as an areal feature (cf. Dimmendaal n.d.: 1). In the latter case, the nominative is marked by a different tonal pattern (3):

(3) Nominative vs. accusative in Eastern Sudanic (Nilo-Saharan)

- a. *é-dól émbártá*
 3SG-see horse.ACC
 ‘He sees the horse.’
- b. *é-dól émbartá*
 3SG-see horse.NOM
 ‘The horse sees him.’

The term “accusative” represents a semantically narrowed translation of the more appropriate Greek term αἰτιατική by the Roman polymath Varro, which etymologically points to reasons indicated by this case.² In the following, the term “dependent case” will also be used, in accordance with the Arabic term *naṣb*. This term covers functions other than the direct object, i.e. the marking of predicates, focalized subjects, and even the citation form and the vocative, underscoring again the value of the term “absolutive”. Accordingly, one also speaks of “nominative-absolutive languages”.³

2 Cf. also Haspelmath 2009.

3 We will not touch upon ergative systems in this paper, as found, for instance, in modern Neo-Aramaic, even though ergative languages can be considered a further development of a “marked nominative” system. For the record, here are standard definitions:
 Ergative-absolutive (or simply ergative): the argument (subject) of an intransitive verb is in the same case as the patient (direct object) of a transitive verb; this case is then called the absolutive case, with the agent (subject) of a transitive verb being in the ergative case.

2 The Afroasiatic frame

Before investigating the situation in Semitic, especially Arabic and Ethio-Semitic, it is instructive to consider the scenario in a wider Afroasiatic perspective. One has argued that Afroasiatic originally had a subject (or “agent”) case associated with an *u*-ending and a predicative/absolute (“non-agent”) case, considered the citation form, which also served for marking the object, associated with an *a*-ending.⁴ In the East-Cushitic language Borana, for instance, one finds an opposition between a subject case terminating in *-i*, vs. an absolute case terminating in *-a* (which also functions as citation case), e.g., *nam-i* ‘(a) man’ (subject) vs. *nam-a* ‘(a) man’ (predicate), as in *kunin nam-a* ‘this is a man’ (cf. Sasse 1984: 112) (4):

- (4) Subject vs. predicate case in Boraana (East-Cushitic)

nam-i ‘(a) man’ (subject)

vs.

nam-a ‘(a) man’ (predicate)

Two other possibilities attested in Semitic also can be observed in the wider Afroasiatic scenario (cf. Handschuh 2014: 64f.):⁵

- (i) overt nominative case-marking on the subject of the nominal predication and zero-coding of the predicate nominal, e.g., in (5):

- (5) Overt nominative case-marking in Oromo (Owens 1985: 100)

mak’áa-n axaaxíuu xiyyá álii

name-NOM grandfather my Ali

‘My grandfather’s name is Ali.’

- (ii) nominative case-marking on the subject and accusative case-marking on the nominal predicate, as frequently found in both Cushitic and Omotic, e.g., in (6):

Ergative–accusative (or tripartite): the argument (subject) of an intransitive verb is in its own case (the intransitive case), separate from that of the agent (subject) or patient (direct object) of a transitive verb (which is in the ergative case or accusative case, respectively).

4 Cf. notably Gensler 2000; for an in-depth description of the scenario in Cushitic, cf. Appleyard 2012: 205–206 as well as Mous 2012: 369–373.

5 The following Cushitic and Omotic examples are quoted in Handschuh 2014.

(6) Accusative case-marking on the nominal predicate in Cushitic and Omotic

a. K’abeena (Eastern Cushitic; Crass 2005: 264)

ku manc^u moggaancoh^a
 DIST.M man.NOM thief.ACC.COP.M
 ‘That man is a thief.’

b. Wolaytta (Omotic; Lamberti and Sottile 1997: 225)

he bitann-ey laagge
 that man-NOM friend.ACC
 ‘That man is a friend.’

Scenario (i) is reflected by the Akkadian “stative” (or “verbal adjective”) *paris*;⁶ scenario (ii) is attested in both Gə‘əz and Classical Arabic (see below).

Focus marking in Cushitic appears to observe rules that are quite similar to focus marking in Arabic. Here are further Cushitic examples (7):

(7) Focus marking in Cushitic

a. Oromo (Owens 1985: 108)

makiináa tiyyá-a diim-tuu
 car my-FOC red-F
 ‘My car is red.’

b. Arbore (Eastern Cushitic; Hayward 1984: 113f.)

faraway zéhe
 horse.PRED died
 ‘A horse died.’ (answer to the question: what died?)

c. *farawé ?i-y zahate*
 horse.NOM PVS-3SG die.3SG.F

‘A horse died’ (unsolicited statement)

d. K’abeena (Crass 2005: 256)

’áni-’nu gorru ’ataalaammi
 1SG.NOM-EMPH hunger.ACC be_able.IPFV.1SG
 ‘When it comes to me, I can cope with hunger well.’

In the Boraana dialect of Oromo, the grammatical subject in a passive clause is always marked by the focus marker *yaa* (8):

6 For details, cf. Huehnergard 2005: 219–223, especially the variant *Ḥammurapi šar* (king.3SG.STAT) next to *Ḥammurapi šarrum* (king.NOM) ‘Hammurapi is/was the king’.

- (8) Focus marking of grammatical subject in Boraana Oromo passive clauses
(Crass 2005: 275)

fooni yaa d'aab-am-ani
meat FOC cook-PASS-3PL.PST
'The meat has been cooked.'

A comparable functional opposition can be observed in the Berber "state" (elsewhere corresponding to case) system, where the "independent form" characterized by an *a*-vowel designates the direct object, the nominal predicate, and a number of adverbial cases, whereas the "dependent form" characterized by an *u*-vowel designates the non-focalized subject, the adnominal genitive, and the complement of prepositions.⁷ Here is an illustration (9):

- (9) Dependent vs. independent "state" (case) in Berber (cf. Sasse 1984)

- a. *ayiul* *iuya-t* *urgaz*
DEF.donkey.INDEP buy.3M.SG.PRET-it DEF.man.DEP
'The man bought the *donkey*.'
- b. *argaz* *iuya* *ayiul*
DEF.man.INDEP buy.3M.SG.PRET DEF.donkey.INDEP
'It was the *man*, who bought the donkey.'

As we will see, the comparative Afroasiatic perspective lends support to the functional status of the Arabic dependent case (*našb*), i.e. it reflects its multifunctionality. Thereby, one has to be careful not to mix up the concepts of "dependent" and "independent" in Berber with the scenario in Arabic grammatical theory, where "independent" (*raf*) refers to the nominative and the indicative and "dependent" to the oblique case and the mood in subordinated sentences (subjunctive). Indeed, it emerges that many Afroasiatic languages have to be considered marked nominative languages featuring an opposition between "nominative" and "absolute" in a synchronic perspective.⁸

3 The situation in Semitic

In the following, the relevance of the opposition "nominative" vs. "absolute" shall be illustrated within the Semitic language family.⁹

⁷ For details cf. see Sasse 1984: 120f.

⁸ Gensler (2000) argues accordingly.

⁹ Here and in the following, "ACC" is used for markers of direct objects as well as other functions of the "dependent" or "absolute" case.

3.1 Marking the direct object

In Semitic languages marking case morphologically, the direct object is indeed marked by an *a*-ending, e.g., in Akkadian (here: Old Babylonian) and Classical Arabic (10):

- (10) The direct object in Akkadian (Old Babylonian) and Classical Arabic
- the direct object in Akkadian (Old Babylonian) (Huehnergard 2005: 20)
amtum kasp-am iṣbat
 female_servant silver-ACC seize.3SG.PRET
 ‘The female servant seized the silver.’
 - the direct object in Classical Arabic (“accusative”, *mafʿūl bi-hī*):
ḍarabtu zayd-an
 strike.1SG.PF Zayd-ACC
 ‘I struck Zayd.’

In Semitic languages that do not mark case, the direct object, usually when being definite, is marked by a *nota accusativi*, e.g., in Hebrew (*ʿēl*) and Amharic (*-n*) (11):

- (11) The definite direct object in Hebrew and Amharic
- nota accusativi* *ʿēl* in Hebrew
bə-rēšīl bārā(ʿ) ʾēlōhīm ʿēl haš-šāmayim
 in-beginning create.3M.SG.PF God ACC DEF-heaven
wə-ʿēl hā-ʾāreṣ
 and-ACC DEF-earth
 ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.’
 - nota accusativi* *-n* in Amharic¹⁰
māskot-u-n zəga
 window-DEF-ACC close.M.SG.IMP
 ‘Close the window!’

As the Arabic *maṣdar* typically occurs within the *mafʿūl muṭlaq* construction (inner object or “figura etymologica”), the dependent case is assumed to be the default case by the Arab grammarians. Hence, the *maṣdar* counts as another typical function of the dependent case (12):

¹⁰ For the origin of this *nota accusativi* cf. Appleyard 2004.

(12) The *maḡ'ūl muṭlaq* construction in Classical Arabic

ḍarabtu ḍarb-an
 strike.1SG.PF strike.MAṢḌAR-ACC
 'I struck hard.' ('I struck a strike.')

3.2 Marking the predicate

In Classical Arabic and Ethio-Semitic, the mentioned *a*-ending also applies for marking the predicate in verbal clauses, in Arabic after the verbs called *kāna wa- 'aḥawātu-hā 'kāna* ('he was') and its sisters'. Here are relevant examples (13):

(13) Marking the predicate in Classical Arabic and Gə'əz verbal clauses

a. Marking the predicate of *kāna* and its related verbs in Classical Arabic

(*ḥabar kāna wa- 'aḥawāti-hā*):
kāna Zayd-un qā'im-an
 be.3M.SG.PF Zayd-NOM stand.PTC-ACC
 'Zayd was standing.'

b. Marking of the predicate in Gə'əz

konä nəgus-ä
 be.3M.SG.PF king-ACC
 'He became king.'

c. *rəgəmt-ä təkun mədr*

cursed.F.ACC be.3F.SG.JUSS earth
 'The earth shall be cursed.'

An *a*-ending is also characteristic of the predicate or predicative state in Palaeo-Syrian, Old Akkadian, and Amurrite, as well as in some constructions with '*ammā* in the oldest forms of Classical Arabic (14):¹¹

(14) Nominal clauses with predicate in the dependent case (*naṣb*)

'ammā 'anta barr-an fa-qtarib
 if you.M.INDEP believing-ACC CONJ-approach.M.SG.IMP
 'If you are believing then come!'

An interesting case is the marking of the predicate in Amharic conditional clauses such as (15):

¹¹ Cf. Lipiński 2001: 273f. and 495.

(15) Marking of the predicate in Amharic conditional clauses

əssu-n b-əhon al-adärg-äw näbbär
 he-ACC in-be.1SG.IPFV NEG-1SG.IPFV-īt.DEP be.3M.SG.PF
 ‘If I were him, I wouldn’t have done it.’

The key phrase in the famous *mas’ala az-zunbūrīya*, where the position of the Kūfan grammarians features the dependent case in predicate position, is another case in point (16).¹²

(16) The key phrase in the *mas’ala az-zunbūrīya*

- a. *fa-’iqā huwa ’īyyā-hā*
 CONJ-DEICT he.INDEP ACC-she.DEP
 (according to al-Kisā’ī, i.e. the position of the Kūfan grammarians)
 vs.
 b. *fa-’iqā huwa hiya*
 CONJ-DEICT he.INDEP she.INDEP
 (according to Sībawayhi, i.e. the position of the Baṣran grammarians)
 ‘(however,) the former is (like) the latter (in terms of sting).’

3.3 Marking adverbial function

Marking adverbials is another widespread function of the dependent or “absolute” case in Semitic. Again, this feature is already found in Akkadian (Old Babylonian), where, *inter alia*, place, time, and manner can be expressed. Here are examples (17):

(17) Adverbial use of the dependent case in Akkadian (Huehnergard 2005: 172)

- a. *šarrāq-am abull-am iṣbatū*
 thief-ACC city_gate-ACC seize.3.PL.PRET
 ‘They seized the thief at the city gate.’
 b. *šatt-am šuāti nakr-um ana māt-im īrub*
 year-ACC this fiend-NOM to land-GEN enter.3SG.PRET
 ‘That year, the enemy invaded the land.’
 c. *ḥamutt-am alk-am*
 haste-ACC go.2SG.IPT-VENT
 ‘Come quickly!’

¹² For details, cf. Ibn al-‘Anbārī, *‘Inṣāf*, *mas’ala* 99, A. Fischer 1922 and Edzard 2016a.

Classical Arabic exhibits a broad variety of adverbial usages of the dependent case. Again, here are relevant examples, illustrating the time-qualifier, the space-qualifier, the circumstantial qualifier, the specifying element, and the object of reason (18):¹³

(18) Adverbial use of the dependent case in Arabic

- a. the time-qualifier (*zarf az-zamān*):
ṣumtu l-yawm-a
 fast.1SG.PF DEF-day-ACC
 'I fasted today.'
- b. the space-qualifier (*zarf al-makān*):
ǧalastu 'amām-a-ka
 sit.1SG.PF front-ACC-you.DEP
 'I sat in front of you.'
- c. the circumstantial qualifier (*ḥāl*):
ǧā'a Zayd-un rākib-an
 come.3M.SG.PF Zayd-NOM ride.PTC-ACC
 'Zayd came riding.'
- d. the specifying element (*tamyīz*):
ība Muḥammad-un naḥs-an
 be_content.3M.SG.PF Muḥammad-NOM soul-ACC
 'Muḥammad was content of soul.'
- e. the object of reason (*maḥ'ūl min 'aḡli-hī*):
qāma Zayd-un 'iḡlāl-an li-Bakr-in
 get_up.3M.SG.PF Zayd-NOM honor.MAŠDAR-ACC for-Bakr-GEN
 'Zayd stood in honor of Bakr.'

Thereby, the *tamyīz* also affects the morpho-syntax of numbers between 11 and 99, e.g., the example chosen by Sībawayhi 'iṣrūna dirham-an 'twenty dirham-ACC' (properly "twenty in terms of dirhams") (cf. Carter 1972).

In Amharic, one can also detect traces of the adverbial use of the dependent case (19):

13 These examples are extrapolated from the survey in aš-Širbīnī's treatise *Nūr as-saḡīya fī ḥall 'alfāz al-'Aḡurrūmiya*, as edited, commented, and translated in Carter (1981).

(19) Adverbial use of the dependent case in Amharic (Leslau 1995: 892ff.)

ləǧ-u əǧǧ-e-n yazä-ññ
 child-DEF hand-my-ACC take.3M.SG.PF-me.DEP
 ‘The child took me by the hand (“handwise”).’

3.4 Marking focus

Focus marking in Semitic (here: mainly Arabic) is possibly the function most reminiscent of the function of the dependent or “absolutive” case in Afroasiatic at large. Examples (20a) – (20e), illustrate the focus-marking function of the dependent case, notably the focalized subject.¹⁴ The dependent case in (20bg) presupposes that the set to which the excepted element belongs has already be mentioned:

(20) Focus marking in Classical Arabic

a. the subject noun of ‘indeed’ and its related particles:

(*ism* ‘inna *wa-’aḥawātī-hā*):
’inna Zayd-an qā’im-un
 FOC Zayd-ACC stand.PTC-NOM
 ‘(Indeed,) Zayd is standing.’

b. the noun negated by *lā* (*ism* *lā*) (“absolute negation”):

lā ’ilāh-a ’illā llāh-u
 NEG god-ACC except God-NOM
 ‘There is no god except God.’

c. the excepted element (*mustatnā*):

qāma l-qawm-u ’illā Zayd-an
 get_up.3M.SG.PF DEF-people-NOM except Zayd-ACC
 ‘The people stood up except Zayd.’

d. the first term of an annexation (*’idāfa*) in the vocative (*munādā*):

yā ’abd-a llāh-i
 VOC servant-ACC.CS God-GEN
 ‘O ‘Abdallāh.’

e. the object of accompaniment (*maf’ūl ma’a-hū*):

sirtu wa-n-nīl-a
 travel.1SG.PF CONJ-DEF-Nile-ACC
 ‘I traveled with the Nile.’

14 Cf. also Reckendorf 1921: 108–113 for various cases of the “exclamatory” accusative.

Other examples of the pattern involving the *wāw al-ma'īya* include constructions such as *'ana wa- 'iyyā-ka* 'I and ACC.you.DEP' (comparable to "normal" English *you and me* as opposed to normative English *you and I*).

In the context of focus marking, one can also cite the erroneously so-called *'af'āl at-ta'ağğub* 'verbs of wonder/surprise' (position of the Baṣran grammarians), which in reality constitute frozen elative constructions (correct position of the Kūfan grammarians), in which the original subject was reanalyzed as an object due to the misinterpretation of the elative form as a causative (form IV) (21).¹⁵

(21) Focus marking in frozen elatives in Classical Arabic

mā 'akram-a Zayd-an
 what noble.ELATIVE-ACC Zayd-ACC
 'How noble is Zayd!

Amharic also features comparable examples of focus marking, such as the following (22):

(22) Focus marking in Amharic

awnāt-wa-n nāw
 truth-her.DEP-ACC be.3M.SG.IPF (COP)
 'She is right.'

A focus-marking function may also obtain in the following case in Gə'əz, supposed that *fäqäd-ä-kä* 'your will' constitutes the subject here (23):

(23) Focus marking of the subject in Gə'əz (Waltisberg 2002: 50)

yəkun fäqäd-ä-kä bākāmā bā-sāmay
 be.3M.SG.IPF will-ACC-you.2.M.SG.DEP like in-heaven
wä-bä-mədr-ni
 CONJ-in-earth-too
 'Your will be done on earth as in heaven.' (Mt. 6:10)

In this context it is revealing to look at the distribution of *'iyyā-* in connection with personal pronouns and at the whole spectrum of functions that this particle can adopt. The particle *'iyyā-* also occurs in other context than marking

¹⁵ Cf. Brockelmann 1913: 12–13 and Diem 2013.

the direct object.¹⁶ At first glance, the prototypical function of *'iyyā-* appears indeed to be the one of the direct object marker in ditransitive constructions as in (24):

(24) Verbs with two pronominal objects

'a 'lā-hu 'iyyā-hā
 give.3M.SG-he.DEP ACC-she.DEP
 ‘He gave her/it to him.’

The overlap between focus and object markers is quite intriguing. An interesting case in point is an attested deviating reading variant (*qirā'a*) of 'āya 5 in sūra 1 (25):¹⁷

(25) Deviating reading (*qirā'a*) of 'āya 5 in sūra 1

'iyyā-ka tu 'badu
 ACC-you.M.DEP venerate.2M.SG.IMPF.PASS
 ‘You [God] shall be venerated.’
 instead of standard
'iyyā-ka na 'budu
 ACC-you.M.DEP venerate.1C.PL.IMPF.ACT
 ‘We venerate you [God].’

Clearly, the first case has to be interpreted as representing a focus marker, one of the crucial functions of the dependent or “absolutive” case.

Accordingly, one can also argue that corroborative appositions (*tawkid*) in Arabic – both Classical and Modern Standard – rather reflect a deictic function of the particle *'iyyā-* (26):¹⁸

(26) Standard Arabic appositionive constructions with *'iyyā-* (Wilmsen 2011)

a. *ḡālīka ṣ-ṣawtu 'iyyā-hu*
 DEM.M.SG DEF-voice ACC-he.DEP
 ‘this voice itself’

16 For an overview of suggested etymologies cf. Rubin 2005, chapter 5, and Wilmsen 2013b.

17 Cf. A. Fischer 1922: 154. Again, “ACC” is used in this paper as a technical gloss without prejudice to the function of *'iyyā-* in the given context.

18 Cf. Wilmsen 2011: 316ff. and Wilmsen 2013a/b.

- b. *'ahlu* *d-dunyā* *'iyyā-hum*
 people.CS DEF-world ACC-they.M.PL.DEF
 'the people themselves'

In modern Hebrew, the analogous construction is entirely regular, with *'ot-* being an allomorph (except before the second person plural) of *'et*, which is usually considered to be a cognate of Arabic *'iyyā-* (27):

(27) Appositive construction in modern Hebrew

- 'ot-o* *ha-davar*
 ACC-he.DEF DEF-matter
 'the same matter'

3.5 Object marking of the grammatical subject as a result of re-analysis

The most interesting case in our context may be seen in the object marking of grammatical subjects in Semitic. In both Biblical Hebrew and (strata of) modern Hebrew, the position of the subject in existential or even possessive constructions can be marked by what is traditionally labeled a *nota accusativi*. Hence, one can argue that the slot of the subject is synchronically re-analyzed as the slot of the (direct) object.¹⁹ First, here is an example from modern colloquial Hebrew (28):

(28) Existentials in modern colloquial Hebrew (cf. Glinert 1994: 149)

- a. *yeš ...* 'there is ...' > *yeš 'et ...* 'there is ...'
 EXIST > EXIST ACC
 b. *gam kan yeš 'et ha-be'ayot ha-'ele*
 also here EXIST ACC DEF-problem.PL DEF-DEM.PL
 'Here too there are these problems.'

As is not new, comparable constructions are already attested in (late) Biblical Hebrew, albeit only in the past tense (29):

¹⁹ On this issue cf. also Melnik 2013.

(29) Existentials in Biblical Hebrew

ʾeṭ-šānē hag-gōyīm wə-ʾeṭ-šatē ḥā-ʾārāšōṭ
 ACC-two.M.CS DEF-people.PL CONJ-ACC-two.F.CS DEF-land.PL
l-ī tihyēnā w-īrašnū-ḥā
 for-I.DEP be.NONPAST.3F.PL CONJ-inherit.NONPAST_CONSEC.3PL-she.DEP
 ‘The two nations and the two lands shall be mine and we shall possess them.’ (Ezek. 35:10)

In this context, it is noteworthy that Akkadian construes the cognate verb *išûm* ‘to have’ with the accusative (cf. Huehnergard 2005: 282), reminiscent of the impersonal German verb *es gibt* (Alemannic *es hat*), which likewise governs the accusative.

The dependent case in subject position also occurs in modern Arabic pseudo-verb constructions (“verboids”) such as the following, in which the grammatical subject is syntactically re-analyzed as the grammatical object (30):²⁰

(30) Verboids in Arabic dialects

(cf. Shlonsky 1997, Brustad 2000, Comrie 2008)

- a. *ʾind-ī* ... ‘with me ...’ (“chez moi ...”)
 at-I.DEP
 > *ʾand-i* *yyā-ha* ‘I have her/it (fem.).’
 at-I.DEP ACC.she.DEP
- b. *bi-wudd-ī* ... ‘in my wish ...’
 in-wish-I.DEP
 > *bidd-i* *yyā-ha* ‘I want her/it (fem.).’
 want-I.DEP ACC.her.DEP
- c. *ʾabū-k* *bidd-o* *yyā-k*
 father.CS-you.M.SG.DEP want-he.DEP ACC.you.M.SG.DEP
 ‘Your father requests you(r presence).’ (cf. Elihay 2005: 87)
- d. *fī-nī* ... ‘in me ...’
 in-I.DEP
 > *mā* *fī-nī* *rūḥ* *ma-ʾik*
 NEG in-I.DEP go.1SG.IPF with-you.M.SG
 ‘I’m not able to go with you.’

20 On this issue cf. also Girod 2007.

Synchronically, *'and-*, *bidd-*, and *fī-* can be characterized as pseudo-verbs (“verboids”) that govern the dependent case or, in case of the third example, subordinate clauses. *'and-* and *bidd-* take the possessive, not the object form of the pronominal suffix, indicating the possessor and the author of the wish, respectively. In the case of *fī-*, the use as a mere preposition would entail the use of the possessive (independent) *-yi*, *fī-yi* ‘in me’ (cf. Cowell 1964: 479; apud Comrie 2008: 739) as opposed to the dependent form used here.

Further examples, which also govern the dependent case or, in the case of verboids expressing modality, subordinate clauses (which amounts to the same in Arabic grammatical theory), are the following (31):

(31) Further verboids in Arabic dialects (Cowell 1964; Brustad 2000)

- a. *ba'd-nī b-əl bēt*
still-I.DEP in-DEF house
‘I’m still at home.’ (Syrian Arabic)
- b. *lāssa't-nī b-əl-bēt*
not.yet-I.DEP in-DEF-house
‘I’m not yet at home.’ (Syrian Arabic)
- c. *lāssā-nī mā 'araḡt-ha b-əl-wāžha*
not.yet-I.DEP NEG put_on_view.1SG.PF in-DEF-showcase
‘I haven’t yet put them on view in the showcase’ (Cowell 1964: 546)
- d. *xāss-na nṭayyebu l-šā*
necessary-us.DEP cook.1PL.IPF DEF-dinner
‘We must cook dinner.’ (Moroccan Arabic)

The original semantics of the particles that constitute the core of the verboids are not always transparent any longer. *ba'd* originally means “after”, and *lāssa' / lāssa't* derives from *'ilā s-sā'a* “to this hour”.

Impersonal passive constructions can likewise attract the dependent case. Retsö (1982–1983: 86) provides the following examples (32):

(32) Impersonal passive constructions (Retsö 1982–1983)

- a. *mā yinḡarab wiyyāh*
NEG fight.3M.SG.PASS.IPF ACC.3M.SG
‘He cannot be fought with.’

- b. *mā yinsōlaf wiyyāh*
 NEG speak. 3M.SG.PASS.IPF ACC.3M.SG
 ‘He cannot be spoken with.’

An alternative interpretation may have recourse to the use of *wa-* as a preposition (*wāw al-ma‘īya*), as, e.g., in the expression *bi-mā yattafiqu wa-hādā l-iltizām* ‘with what is in congruence with this commitment’.

In the context of impersonal verbs, Retsö (1982–1983) also points to the fact that the object in Arabic passive phrases can remain in the dependent case, e.g., *‘uḥriġa kitāban* (bring_out.PF.PASS.3M.SG book.ACC) ‘a book was brought out (to him)’. In ditransitive verbal phrases (33a) set in the passive voice (33b), the second object remains in the accusative under any circumstances, reminiscent of the situation in Cushitic (see item (8) above):

(33) Case transfer under passivization

- a. *sammā-hu Muḥammadan*
 call.3M.SG.PF-he.DEP Muḥammad.ACC
 ‘He called him Muḥammad.’
- b. *summiya Muḥammadan*
 call.3M.SG.PF.PASS Muḥammad.ACC
 ‘He was called Muḥammad.’

4 Conclusion

Returning to the problem initially exposed, the Semitic and especially the Arabic scenario clearly shows the broad functional range of the dependent (or “absolutive”) case. Thus, the variety of functions associated with the dependent case (*naṣb*) in Arabic and elsewhere does not constitute anything idiosyncratic. Rather, this variety reflects many of the functions of this case in “marked nominative” languages, in which the dependent case (*naṣb*) would be called “absolutive”. In the Semitic and Afroasiatic languages surveyed, the independent case (“nominative”) is not morphologically more complex, rather *vice versa*, as the dependent case may be marked by a *nota accusativi*. Still, in terms of frequency, the concept of markedness makes sense in this context.

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative	INDEP	independent (case)
ACT	active	IPF	imperfect
CONSEC	consecutive	IPFV	imperfective
CONJ	conjunction	M	masculine
COP	copula	MAṢḌAR	Arabic verbal noun
CS	construct(us)	NEG	negation
DEF	definite	NOM	nominative
DEICT	deictic element	NPST	nonpast
DEM	demonstrative	PASS	passive
DEP	dependent (case)	PRES	presentative
DIST	distal	PRET	preterite
ELAT	elative	PF	perfect
EMPH	emphasis	PL	plural
EXIST	existence (marker)	PRED	predicate
F	feminine	PST	past
FOC	focus	SG	singular
GEN	genitive	VENT	ventive
IMP	imperative		

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Abstract

In standard descriptions of Semitic, the nominative has the role of the unmarked case, typically in the role of the subject, whereas the accusative constitutes the marked case, typically in the role of the direct object. This paper argues that the concept of a “marked nominative” language, which is highly relevant on the Afroasiatic level, also plays an important role in Semitic and especially Arabic, as it catches many roles of the “accusative” (dependent case) that have no connection to the role of the direct object. Thus, the functions of the case traditionally called “accusative” by far transcend the marking of the direct object, and the term “absolute” is therefore preferable, as this term in linguistics also refers to the unmarked citation form as well as nominal forms in focus in “nominative-absolute languages”.