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
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The opposition “nominative” vs. “absolutive” case in a Semitic perspective

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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 “absolutive” 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. “absolutive” 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 “absolutive” 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nominative</th>
<th>Accusative</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gothic</td>
<td>dag-s</td>
<td>dag</td>
<td>‘dag’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Norse</td>
<td>arm-r</td>
<td>arm</td>
<td>‘arm’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icelandic</td>
<td>hest-ur</td>
<td>hest</td>
<td>‘horse’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. sārē-n adīi-n ni iyyī-t-i
   dog-NOM white-NOM FOC bark-F-IPF
   'The white dog is barking.'

b. haat-tii okkōttēe 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. b-dīl embārtā
   3SG-see horse.ACC
   'He sees the horse.'

b. b-dīl embartā
   3SG-see horse.NOM
   'The horse sees him.'

The term "accusative" represents a semantically narrowed translation of the more appropriate Greek term ἀπαρτύχη 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 nasb. 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 per-
spective. One has argued that Afroasiatic originally had a subject (or “agent”) case associated with an u-ending and a predicative/absolutive (“non-agent”) case, considered the citation form, which also served for marking the object, associated with an a-ending. In the East-Cushitic language Borana, for in-
stance, 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.,
\textit{nam-i ‘(a) man’ (subject) vs. nam-a ‘(a) man’ (predicate), as in kuntin nam-a ‘this is a man’ (cf. Sasse 1984: 112) (4):}

(4) Subject vs. predicate case in Boraana (East-Cushitic)
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{nam-i ‘(a) man’ (subject)}
  \item \textit{vs. nam-a ‘(a) man’ (predicate)}
\end{itemize}

Two other possibilities attested in Semitic also can be observed in the wider
Afroasiatic scenario (cf. Handschu 2014: 64f.):\footnote{4}

(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)
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{mak ˈa-n ᛠxaxxɪu xǐyā dìi}
  \item name-NOM grandfather my Ali
  \item ‘My grandfather’s name is Ali.’
\end{itemize}

(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):

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}

\footnote{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, re-
spectively).}

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

\footnote{The following Cushitic and Omotic examples are quoted in Handschu 2014.}
(6) Accusative case-marking on the nominal predicate in Cushitic and Omotic

a. K’abena (Eastern Cushitic; Crass 2005: 264)
   \[ ku \, manc\textsuperscript{6} \, moggancot\textsuperscript{6} \]
   DIST.M man.NOM thief.ACC.COP.M
   ‘That man is a thief.’

b. Wolayyta (Omotic; Lamerti and Sottile 1997: 225)
   \[ he \, bitann-\textsuperscript{ey} \, laagge \]
   that man-NOM friend.ACC
   ‘That man is a friend.’

Scenario (i) is reflected by the Akkadian “static” (or “verbal adjective”) *paris*; scenario (ii) is attested in both Go’az 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)
   \[ makiin\textsuperscript{aa} \, tiiy\textsuperscript{a}-\textsuperscript{a} \, diim-tuu \]
   car my-FOC red-F
   ‘My car is red.’

b. Arbore (Eastern Cushitic; Hayward 1984: 113f.)
   \[ faraw\textsuperscript{e} \, z\textsuperscript{e}\textsuperscript{e} \]
   horse.PRED died
   ‘A horse died.’ (answer to the question: what died?)

c. faraw\textsuperscript{e} \, ̀\textsuperscript{y} \, zahtate \n   horse.NOM PVS-3SG die.3SG.F
   ‘A horse died’ (unsolicited statement)

d. K’abena (Crass 2005: 256)
   \[ \textquote{\textsuperscript{à}ni}-\textsuperscript{nu} \, gorr\textsuperscript{u} \, \textquote{at\textsuperscript{a}al\textsuperscript{a}m} \textsuperscript{m} \]
   1SG.NOM-EMPH hunger.ACC be_able.IPFV.1SG
   ‘When it comes to me, I can cope with hunger well.’

In the Borana 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 *Hamurapi tar* (king.3SG.STAT) next to *Hamurapi larrum* (king.NOM) ‘Hamurapi 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. ayyu
tiyya-$t$
argaz
DEF.donkey.INDEP buy.3M.SG.PRET-3SG DEF.man.DEP
'The man bought the donkey.'

b. argaz
iyya
ayyid
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 ($nusba$), i.e. it reflects its multi-functionality. 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” ($raj$) 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 “absolutive” in a synchronic perspective.\(^8\)

3 The situation in Semitic

In the following, the relevance of the opposition “nominative” vs. “absolutive” 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 “absolutive” case.
3.1 Marking the direct object

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

(10) The direct object in Akkadian (Old Babylonian) and Classical Arabic

a. the direct object in Akkadian (Old Babylonian) (Huehnergard 2005: 20)
   \textit{am̄tun} \quad \textit{kasp-am} \quad \textit{išbat}
   female\_servant \quad \textit{silver-ACC} \quad \textit{seize\_3SG.PRET}
   ‘The female servant seized the silver.’

b. the direct object in Classical Arabic (“accusative”, \textit{maf'īl bi-hī}):
   \textit{dārābītu} \quad \textit{zayd-an}
   strike\_1SG.PF \quad Zayd-ACC
   ‘I struck Zayd.’

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

(11) The definite direct object in Hebrew and Amharic

a. \textit{nota accusativi} אֵל in Hebrew
   \textit{bā-rēshī} \quad \textit{bārā(')} \quad \textit{ēlōhīm} \quad \textit{ēl} \quad \textit{haš-šāmāyim}
   in\_beginning \quad create\_3M.SG.PF \quad God \quad ACC \quad DEF\_heaven
   \textit{wā-ēl} \quad \textit{hā-āres}
   and\_ACC \quad DEF\_earth
   ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.’

b. \textit{nota accusativi} -\textit{n} in Amharic\textsuperscript{10}
   \textit{māskot-u-n} \quad \textit{zaga}
   window\_DEF\_ACC \quad close\_3M.SG.IMP
   ‘Close the window!’

As the Arabic \textit{masdar} typically occurs within the \textit{maf'īl mutlaq} construction (inner object or “figura etymologica”), the dependent case is assumed to be the default case by the Arab grammarians. Hence, the \textit{masdar} counts as another typical function of the dependent case (12):

\textsuperscript{10} For the origin of this nota accusative cf. Appleyard 2004.
(12) The *maf'ul mutlaq* construction in Classical Arabic

\[ \text{darabtu } \text{darb-an} \]

strike.1SG.PF strike.MASC-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* \(wa-\) *aljawātu-hā* ‘*kāna* (“he was”) and its sisters. Here are relevant examples (13):

(13) Marking the predicate in Classical Arabic and Ga’az verbal clauses

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

\( (\text{habar kāna } wa-\text{aljawātu-hā}) : \)

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{kāna} & \quad \text{Zayd-un} & \quad \text{qā’īm-an} \\
\text{bc.3M.SG.PF} & \quad \text{Zayd-NOM} & \quad \text{stand.PTC-ACC}
\end{align*} \]

‘Zayd was standing.’

b. Marking of the predicate in Ga’az

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{konā} & \quad \text{nogus-ā} \\
\text{bc.3M.SG.PF} & \quad \text{king-ACC}
\end{align*} \]

‘He became king.’

c. \( \text{ragamt-ā } \text{takun } \text{madr} \)

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{cursed.F.ACC} & \quad \text{be.3F.SG.JUSS } \text{earth}
\end{align*} \]

‘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 ‘*amnā* in the oldest forms of Classical Arabic (14):\(^\text{11}\)

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

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{‘amnā } \text{‘anta } \text{barr-an } \text{fa-qātarīb}
\end{align*} \]

if \( \text{you.INDP } \text{believing-ACC } \text{CONJ-approach.M.SG.IMP} \)

‘If you are believing then come!’

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

---

\(^\text{11}\) Cf. Lipiński 2001: 273f. and 495.
(15) Marking of the predicate in Amharic conditional clauses

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{he-ACC} & \quad \text{in-be.1SG.IPFV} & \quad \text{NEG-1SG.IPFV-ILDEP} & \quad \text{he.3M.SG.PF} \\
\text{assu-n} & \quad \text{b-ahon} & \quad \text{al-adārg-āw} & \quad \text{nābhrā} \\
\end{align*}
\]

‘If I were him, I wouldn’t have done it.’

The key phrase in the famous *mas'ala az-zunbūriya*, 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-zunbūriya*

a. *fa-'idā huwa 'iyyā-hā*
   \hspace{1cm} \text{CON-DEICT he.INDEP ACC-he.INDEP}
   \hspace{1cm} \text{(according to al-Kisā‘i, i.e. the position of the Kūfan grammarians)}
   \hspace{1cm} \text{vs.}

b. *fa-'idā huwa hiya*
   \hspace{1cm} \text{CON-DEICT he.INDEP she.INDEP}
   \hspace{1cm} \text{(according to Sibawayhi, i.e. the position of the Başran grammarians)}
   \hspace{1cm} ‘(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 “absolutive” 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 abułl-am išbatā*
   \hspace{1cm} \text{thief-ACC city_gate-ACC seize.3.PL.PRET}
   \hspace{1cm} ‘They seized the thief at the city gate.’

b. *šatt-am šuāti nakr-am ana māt-im īrub*
   \hspace{1cm} \text{year-ACC this friend-NOM to land-GEN enter.3SG.PRET}
   \hspace{1cm} ‘That year, the enemy invaded the land.’

c. *ḥamut-am alk-am*
   \hspace{1cm} \text{haste-ACC go.2SG.IPT-VENT}
   \hspace{1cm} ‘Come quickly!’

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).\footnote{13 These examples are extrapolated from the survey in al-Širāḥī’s treatise Nīr ʿas-saḡīya fi ʿallʿ ʿafālʿ al-ʿAgūrūmīya, as edited, commented, and translated in Carter 1981.)

(18) Adverbial use of the dependent case in Arabic

a. the time-qualifier (ẓarf az-zamān):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sumtu} & \quad \text{l-yawm-a} \\
\text{fist.1SG.PF} & \quad \text{DEF-day-ACC}
\end{align*}
\]

‘I fasted today.’

b. the space-qualifier (ẓarf al-makān):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{gālasū} & \quad \text{ʾamām-ka} \\
\text{sit.1SG.PF} & \quad \text{front-ACC-YOU.DEP}
\end{align*}
\]

‘I sat in front of you.’

c. the circumstantial qualifier (ḥāl):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{gāʾa} & \quad \text{Zayd-un} \quad \text{rākib-an} \\
\text{come.3M.SG.PF} & \quad \text{Zayd-NOM} \quad \text{ride.PTC-ACC}
\end{align*}
\]

‘Zayd came riding.’

d. the specifying element (tāmyīz):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{jāba} & \quad \text{Muḥammad-un} \quad \text{nafs-an} \\
\text{be_content.3M.SG.PF} & \quad \text{Muḥammad-NOM} \quad \text{soul-ACC}
\end{align*}
\]

‘Muḥammad was content of soul.’

e. the object of reason (maṭ al ʿilm aqili-hū):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{qāma} & \quad \text{Zayd-un} \quad \text{iğlāl-an} \quad \text{li-Bakr-in} \\
\text{get_up.3M.SG.PF} & \quad \text{Zayd-NOM} \quad \text{honor.MASDAR-ACC for-Bakr-GEN}
\end{align*}
\]

‘Zayd stood in honor of Bakr.’

Thereby, the tāmyīz also affects the morpho-syntax of numbers between 11 and 99, e.g., the example chosen by Sibawayhī ʿīsraʿīna 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):
(19) Adverbial use of the dependent case in Amharic (Leslau 1995: 892ff.)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{log-u} & \quad \text{gg-e-n} & \quad \text{yazä-hn} \\
\text{child-DEF} & \quad \text{hand-my-ACC} & \quad \text{take.3M.SG.PF-mc,DEP}
\end{align*}
\]

‘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 been mentioned:

(20) Focus marking in Classical Arabic

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{isn} & \quad \text{‘inna wa- āẖāwāti-hā}: \\
\text{FOC} & \quad \text{Zayd-ACC} & \quad \text{qā im-un} & \quad \text{stand,PTC-NOM}
\end{align*}
\]

‘(Indeed,) Zayd is standing.’

b. the noun negated by ḥā (Ism lā) (“absolute negation”):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{lā} & \quad \text{illāh-a} & \quad \text{‘illā illāh-u} & \quad \text{NEG god-ACC except God-NOM}
\end{align*}
\]

‘There is no god except God.’

c. the excepted element (mustaṭnā):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{qāma} & \quad \text{l-qawm-u} & \quad \text{‘illā Zayd-an} & \quad \text{get_up.3M.SG.PF DEF-people-NOM except Zayd-ACC}
\end{align*}
\]

‘The people stood up except Zayd.’

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{yā} & \quad \text{’abd-a} & \quad \text{llāh-i} & \quad \text{VOC servant-ACC_CS God-GEN}
\end{align*}
\]

‘O ‘Abdallāh.’

e. the object of accompaniment (mafūl ma’-a-hū):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sīr} & \quad \text{wa-n-nil-a} & \quad \text{travel.1SG.PF CONJ-DEF-Nile-ACC}
\end{align*}
\]

‘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-maʿṣiya include constructions such as ‘ana wa-ḥiyāt-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'il at-ta'āqqub ‘verbs of wonder/surprise’ (position of the Başran grammarians), which in reality constitute frozen elative constructions (correct position of the Küfän 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).  

(21) Focus marking in frozen elatives in Classical Arabic
mā ʾakram-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
awnat-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 Go’až, supposed that faqaded-kā ‘your will’ constitutes the subject here (23):

(23) Focus marking of the subject in Go’až (Waltisberg 2002: 50)
yokun  faqaded-kā  bākāmā  bā-samaay
be.3M.SG.IPF  will-ACC.you.2M.SG.DEP  like  in-heaven
wā-bā-mɔdr-ni
CONJ-in-earth-too
‘Your will will be done on earth as in heaven.’ (Mt. 6:10)

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

the direct object. At first glance, the prototypical function of ʾiyā- appears indeed to be the one of the direct object marker in diritransitive constructions as in (24):

(24) Verbs with two pronominal objects

ʾaʿtā-hu ʾiyā-hā
give.3.M.SG-HE.DEP ACC-HE.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 (qirāʿa) of ʾāya 5 in sūra 1 (25).17

(25) Deviating reading (qirāʿa) of ʾāya 5 in sūra 1

ʾiyā-ka tu ḏadu
ACC-YOU.M.DEP venerate.2.M.SG.IMPF.PASS
‘You [God] shall be venerated.’

instead of standard

ʾiyā-ka na bādu
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 (tawkīd) in Arabic – both Classical and Modern Standard – rather reflect a deictic function of the particle ʾiyā- (26):18

(26) Standard Arabic appositive constructions with ʾiyā- (Wilmsen 2011)
a. ḏālika ʾs-ʾawtu ʾiyā-hu
DEM.M.SG DEF-VOICE ACC-HE.DEP
‘this voice itself’

---

17 Cf. A. Fischer 1922: 154. Again, “Acc” is used in this paper as a technical gloss without prejudice to the function of ʾiyā- in the given context.
b. ‘ahlu d-dunyā ʿiyā-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 ʿiyā (27):

(27) Appositive construction in modern Hebrew
   ʿot-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):

   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

\begin{align}
& 'et-šō̂nē \quad hag-gō̂yōm \quad wa-'ef-šatē \quad hā-ō̂rō̂ṣām \\
\text{ACC-TWO.M.CS} & \text{DEF-people.PL} & \text{CONJ-ACC-TWO.F.CS} & \text{DEF-land.PL} \\
& l-n \quad šī̂yānā \quad w-šârāznū-hā \\
\text{for-L.DEP} & \text{BC.NONPAST.3F.PL} & \text{CONJ-inherit,NONPAST_CONSEC.3PL-she.DEP} \\
\end{align}

"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 īšūm ‘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

(c.f. Shlonsky 1997, Brustad 2000, Comrie 2008)

a. ’ind-I ... ‘with me ...’ ("chez moi ...")

\begin{align}
\text{at-L.DEP} & \quad > \quad \text{and-I} \quad \text{yyā-ha} & \text{I have her[it (fem.).]}
\text{at-L.DEP} & \quad \text{ACC.she.DEP} \\
\end{align}

b. bi-wudd-i ... ‘in my wish ...’

\begin{align}
\text{in-wish-L.DEP} & \quad > \quad \text{bidd-i} \quad \text{yyā-ha} & \text{I want her[it (fem.).]}
\text{want-L.DEP} & \quad \text{ACC.her.DEP} \\
\end{align}

c. ’abū-k

\begin{align}
\text{father.CS-YOU.M.SG.DEP} & \quad \text{bidd-o} \quad \text{yyā-k} \\
\text{want-he.DEP} & \quad \text{ACC.YOU.M.SG.DEP} \\
\end{align}

‘Your father requests you(r presence).’ (cf. Elihay 2005: 87)

d. ft-nī ... ‘in me ...’

\begin{align}
\text{in-L.DEP} & \quad > \quad \text{mā} \quad \text{ft-nī} \quad \text{rāh} \quad \text{ma-ik} \\
\text{NEG} & \quad \text{in-L.DEP} & \quad \text{go.1SG.IPF-with-YOU.M.SG} \\
\end{align}

‘I’m not able to go with you.’

\(^{20}\) On this issue cf. also Girod 2007.
Synchronously, *'and-, bid-, and fi-* can be characterized as pseudo-verbs ("verboids") that govern the dependent case or, in case of the third example, subordinate clauses. *'and-* and *bid-* 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 *fi-,* the use as a mere preposition would entail the use of the possessive (independent) *-yī, fi-yī* 'in me' (cf. Cowell 1964: 479; apud Comrie 2008: 739) as opposed to the dependent from 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-al bēt*
       still-L.DEP in-DEF house
       'I’m still at home.' (Syrian Arabic)
    b. *lāssā t-nī b-al-bēt*
       not,yet-L.DEP in-DEF-house
       'I’m not yet at home.' (Syrian Arabic)
    c. *lāssā nī mā a-raš-ha b-al-wāţ-ha*
       not,yet-L.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. *xas-sa nīt-a-yēb u l-3a*
       necessary-us.DEP cook.IPL.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 *lāssā / lāssā t* derives from *‘ilā s-sā ʿā 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 yinhārab wiyyāh*
       NEG fight.3M.SG.PASS.IPF ACC.3M.SG
       'He cannot be fought with.'
b. mā yinsālaf ḭuyūh
   NEG speak.3M.SG.PASS.JPF ACC.3M.SG
   'He cannot be spoken with.'

An alternative interpretation may have recourse to the use of wa- as a preposition (waḥ al-ma‘yaa), as, e.g., in the expression bi-mā yatāsa‘āq wa-hāṣa 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., ḥabība 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 Muḥammadan.ACC
   'He called him Muḥammad.'

b. summiya Muḥammadan
call.3M.SG.PF.PASS Muḥammadan.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 (naṣīb) 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 (naṣīb) 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
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References

1. Primary sources


2. Secondary sources


The opposition "nominative" vs. "absolutive" case


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 “absolutive” is therefore preferable, as this term in linguistics also refers to the unmarked citation form as well as nominal forms in focus in “nominative-absolutive languages”.