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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 interpretation[1]. For Berber, A. Aikhen-

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[1] Already I. M. Diakonoff, *Semito-Hamitic Languages. An Essay in Classification*, Nauka, Moscow 1965, p. 58, advocated for such an ergativic interpretation of the proto-Afro-Asiatic case system. For Semitic see H. P. Müller, *Ergative Constructions in Early Semitic Languages*, in «Journal of Near Eastern Studies» 54, 1995, pp. 261-271; E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages. Outline of a Comparative Grammar*, Peeters, Leuven 2000², pp. 259ff. (§ 32.1-7, etc.); for Arabic: J. Tropper, *Kasusverhältnisse in arabischen Ausnahmesätzen. Absolutivkasus nach 'illa*, in «Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik» 37, 1999, pp. 25-31. For Berber see A.Y. Aikhenvald, *Split ergativity in Berber languages*, in «St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies» 4, 1995, pp. 39-68; E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages*, cit., §§ 2.14; 22.1-7. On Chadic see Z. Frajzyngier, *On the Proto-Chadic Syntactic Pattern*, in *Current Progress in Afro-Asiatic Linguistics. Papers of the Third International Hamito-Semitic Congress*, ed. by J. Bynon, John Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 1984, pp. 139-159; Z. Frajzyngier, *Ergative and Nominative Accusative Features in Mandara*, in «Journal of African Languages and Linguistics» 6, 1984, pp. 35-45; Z. Frajzyngier, *Ergativity, number, and agreement*, in *Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistic Society*, ed. by M. Niepokuj, M. VanClay, V. Nikiforidou, D. Feder, Berkeley Linguistics Society-University of California, Berkeley 1985, pp. 96-106. On a presumed ergativity of Egyptian see P. Grandet, B. Mathieu, *La construction ergative de l'accompli égyptien*, in *Atti del VI Congresso Internazionale di Egittologia*, a cura di S. Curto, S. Donadoni, A.M. Donadoni Roveri, B. Alberton, Torino 1993, II, pp. 145-151; A. Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian. A Linguistic Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, pp. 83-85; A. Roccati, *Studi tipologici. I. Sull'ergatività dell'egiziano*, in *Afroasiatica Neapolitana. Contributi presentati all'8° Incontro di Linguistica Afroasiatica (Camito-Semitica)*, ed. by A. Bausi, M. Tosco, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli 1997, pp. 113-122; A. Roccati, *La funzione del morfema iw in medioegiziano*, in *Afroasiatica Tergestina. Papers from the 9th Italian Meeting of Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) Linguistics* (Trieste, April 23-24, 1998), ed. by M. Lamberti, L. Tonelli, Unipress, Padova 1999, pp. 265-268. Against such a concept: J. Zeidler, *Altägyptisch und Hamitosemitisch. Bemerkungen zu den Vergleichenden Studien von Karel Petráček*, in «Lingua Aegyptia» 2, 1992, pp. 210-212; A. Zaborski, *On the alleged ergativity in Hamitosemitic languages*, in *Collectanea Linguistica In Honorem Casimiri Ponański*, Ksiegarnia Akademicka, Kraków 1999, pp. 309-317; C.H. Reintges, *Ancient Egyptian in 3D. Synchrony, Diachrony and Typology of a Dead Language*, in «Orientalia» 67, 1998, pp. 458-461; M. Waltisberg, *Zur Ergativhypothese im Semitischen*, in «Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft» 152, 2002, pp. 11-62.

vald has claimed that the accusative or "free state" of the noun, as well as the "object pronoun", represent the absolutive case of an ergative case system, an opinion that does not hold in this form[2]; what we are here dealing with is the feature of an absolute state, or case, a feature that has nothing to do with an ergative case system (nor with an accusative case system, at that). Nevertheless, Lipiński, in his *Semitic Languages*, refers in several paragraphs to Berber as an unequivocal ergative type language[3]. Obviously, the two (near-)homonymous terms of "absolute state (*or* case)" and "absolutive case" h a v e b e e n c o n - f u s e d by these and other authors; this question shall be the main topic of this paper.

The issue of Afro-Asiatic ergativity has not only been met with agreement among scholars. Of the critical contributions, we will take into consideration the article by M. Waltisberg[4]. However, the author seems to have fallen for the very same mistake which those made whom he criticises, viz. the confounding of "absolute state" and "absolutive case".

W h a t , t h e n , i s a n " a b s o l u t i v e c a s e " ? It is one of the two basic cases of an ergative-absolutive case system, the other being the ergative case.

> **Absolutive case** is the case of nouns in ergative-absolutive languages that would generally be the subjects of intransitive verbs or the objects of transitive verbs in the translational equivalents of nominative-accusative languages such as English.
> **Ergative case** is the case of nouns in ergative-absolutive languages that would generally be the subjects of transitive verbs in the translation equivalents of nominative-accusative languages such as English[5].

W h a t , o n t h e o t h e r h a n d , i s a n " a b s o l u t e s t a t e " ? In Semitic studies, this term is used in a two-fold way: (a) absolute state vs. construct state, and (b) absolute state as kind of "bare noun". In Hebrew grammar (but also, e.g., in Coptic grammar), the absolute state contrasts with the construct state: *dābār* «a word», but *dᵊbār-'ᵉlōhīm* «the word of god»; Coptic *sōtᵊp* «to choose», *but setp-hen-rōme* «to choose men».

But the term *absolute state* is also used in a different sense, and this is where the confusion comes in. Aramaic has, in addition to the absolute state and the construct state, a third one: the determined or emphatic state[6]. Morphologically, it is characterized by an ending *-ā*. In Biblical Aramaic, it is the expression of the determined noun in the nominative, accusative and genitive

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[2] A. Y. Aikhenvald, *Split ergativity*, cit., pp. 39-68. For a critical evaluation see H. Satzinger, *On the assumed ergativity of the Berber language(s)*, in *Proceedings of the 10th Meeting of Hamito-Semitic (Afroasiatic) Linguistics* (Florence, 18-20 April 2001), ed. by P. Fronzaroli, P. Marrassini, Dipartimento di Linguistica, Università di Firenze, Firenze 2005, pp. 381-389.

[3] E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages,* cit., pp. 261-262 (§ 32.3 d).

[4] M. Waltisberg, *Zur Ergativhypothese*, cit.

[5] See http://www.sil.org/linguistics/GlossaryOfLinguisticTerms/WhatIsAbsolutiveCase.htm

[6] E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages*, cit., p. 283 (§ 33.22).

functions. (Hence, this emphatic state of Biblical Aramaic is the equivalent of definite article + noun in Hebrew: Hebrew *had-dāḇār* ~ Aramaic *millᵊṯ-ā*, Hebrew *hab-báyiṯ* ~ Aramaic *bayt-ā*, Hebrew *ham-malkāh* ~ Aramaic *malkᵊṯ-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 (*mɛlɛk* < **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 mimation: *šar* «king», as opposed to *šarrum, šarrim, šarram*. It is regarded to be identical with the third person forms of the stative[7]. 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. *-tā*[8].

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 *ᵓal-malkā ṭāḇ* «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 *ṣeḫer rabi* «little (and) big».

• Certain specifications of place or time, etc.

• Numbers, Akkadian *ištēn* «one», Syriac *ḥad* «one»; Akkadian *šalaš šāt qēmum* «three shut flour»; Syriac *tlōṯō yrḥīn* «three months»; the tens in Akkadian, Geʿez and Epigraphic South Arabian[9]. Also for words meaning «all», «many», «few».

• In certain expressions, after prepositions[10], Akkadian *ana dār* «for ever»; Syriac *ba-ʿǧal* «in haste».

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[7] W. von Soden, *Grundriß der akkadischen Grammatik*, Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, Roma 1995³, p. 79 (§ 62c); p. 101 (§ 77d); G. Buccellati, *An interpretation of the Akkadian Stative as a Nominal Sentence*, in «Journal of Near Eastern Studies» 27, 1968, pp. 1-12.

[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.

[10] S. Moscati et alii, *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages. Phonology and Morphology*, Harrassowotz, Wiesbaden 1969, p. 102 (12.79).

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[11], which have neither declension, nor articles, nor anything like the Syriac -$\bar{a}$ 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[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 *jw.f (ḥr) djt n.j ꜥḳw ḥnḳt* «and he gave me bread (*'ḳw*) and beer (*ḥnḳt*)» 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 -$\bar{a}$ had lost its role of a definiteness marker.

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[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%20 Mandarin%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.mscc.huji.ac.il/~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).

[12] Cfr. J. Černý, S. I. Groll, *A Late Egyptian Grammar*, Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, Rome 1978, pp. 69-77 (§ 4.4); pp. 521-522 (§ 5.3).

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

In a number of Cushitic languages Sasse[13] 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.

In Berber and also in Cushitic, the absolute form encompasses the function of an a c c u s a t i v e   c a s e (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)[14].

Above, Waltisberg has been mentioned, who reports on Semitistic arguments *pro* ergative case and *pro* absolutive case. According to these data, the assumption of traces or residues of a Semitic e r g a t i v e   c a s e merely rests on an equation of the nominative and the locative cases[15]. The features adduced as evidence for residues of an a b s o l u t i v e   c a s e are, on the other hand, quite manifold[16]. Most of them attest, however, to an a b s o l u t e   s t a t e (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[17].

• Quotations[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»[19] is definitely wrong. An absolute form with the function of, inter

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[13] H.J. Sasse, *Case in Cushitic, Semitic and Berber*, cit.

[14] I. M. Diakonoff, *Semito-Hamitic Languages*, cit., p. 58.

[15] M. Waltisberg, *Zur Ergativhypothese*, cit., pp. 21-22 (§ 2.1).

[16] *Ivi*, pp. 22-34 (§ 2.2).

[17] The works reviewed by Waltisberg are the following: I. M. Diakonoff, *Afrasian Languages*, cit., p. 59; I. J. Gelb, *Old Akkadian Writing and Grammar*, Oriental Institute, Chicago 1961, pp. 146ff; E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages. Outline of a Comparative Grammar*, Peeters, Leuven 1997, pp. 256ff; H. P. Müller, *Die Konstruktionen mit hinne "siehe" und ihr sprachgeschichtlicher Hintergrund*, in «Zeitschrift für Althebraistik» 2/1, 1989, pp. 52ff; H. P. Müller, *Ergative Constructions in Early Semitic Languages*, in «Journal of Near Eastern Studies» 54, 1995, pp. 261-271; H.J. Sasse, *Case in Cushitic, Semitic and Berber*, cit., p. 119; J. Tropper, *Kasusverhältnisse in arabischen Ausnahmesätzen: Absolutivkasus nach 'illa*, in «Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik» 37, 1999, p. 29; J. Tropper, *Die Endungen der semitischen Suffixkonjugation und der Absolutivkasus*, in «Journal of Semitic Studies» 44, 1999, pp. 188-190; J. Tropper, *Griechisches und semitisches Alphabet. Buchstabennamen und Sibilantenentsprechungen*, in «Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft» 150, 2000, pp. 317-321.

[18] M. Waltisberg, *Zur Ergativhypothese*, cit., pp. 27-29 (§ 2.2.6).

[19] E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages*, cit., p. 263 (§ 32.6).

alia, a quotation form is found in languages of a rather pure accusative-nomina-
tive type like Akkadian (form in -Ø) and Old Nubian (form in -a).

• Address[20].

• Predicative form[21], also after thetic particles like Arabic 'inna[22], and after
Arabic 'illā[23].

None of these conditions has anything to do with ergativity, or an a b -
s o l u t i v e   c a s e. On the other hand, they are typical of the a b s o l u t e   s t a t e.

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 *absolutive
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 *aḫiz* «he has been seized»; Egn. *jw.f rḏj.w n.s* «he has been given
to her»), intransitive verbs are by necessity active (*damqāta* «you are good»;
Egn. *jswt.n jj.tj a'ḏ.tj* «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 '*ḏ* «to become safe» in a clause of circumstance). Another feature is the
paradigm of the personal pronoun that functions as object pronoun with tran-
sitive verbs (Arab. *'a'ṭaytu-hu*, Egn. *jw rḏ.n.j sw*, Ber. *fkiv-t*, all «I gave it»), but
also as subject, or kind of subject, in other constructions: in Egyptian with the
adjectival predicate (*nḏm sw* «he is pleasant»), in various languages with thetic
particles (Arab. *'inna-hu*, Egn. *m.k sw*, Ber. *ha-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[24].

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[25], whereas in Berber

[20] M. *Waltisberg, Zur Ergativhypothese*, cit., "vocative" pp. 24-25 (§ 2.2.3).

[21] *Ivi*, pp. 29-32 (§ 2.2.7).

[22] *Ivi*, pp. 25-27 (§ 2.2.5).

[23] *Ivi*, pp. 32-34 (§ 2.2.8).

[24] Cfr. H. Satzinger, *The Egyptian conjugations within the Afroasiatic framework, in Egyptol-
ogy at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century. Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of
Egyptologists* (Cairo, 28 March-3 April 2000), ed. by Z. Hawass, L. P. Brock, The American Uni-
versity in Cairo Press, Cairo 2003, III, pp. 392-400 (in particular pp. 395-396).

[25] Cfr. H. Satzinger, *Observations in the Field of the Afroasiatic Suffix Conjugation*, in
Afroasiatica Tergestina, cit., pp. 23-33.

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.

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