"The marked nominative in Arabic, Semitic, and Afroasiatic"

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.

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

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

 Nominative Accusative Gloss

Gothic dag-s dag ‘day’

Old Norse arm-r arm ‘arm’

A comparable scenario is found in Harar Oromo (cf. Owens 1985: 101, 251) (2):

(2) Nominative vs. accusative in Harar Oromo

a. sárée-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.ACC 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 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. έ-dɔ́l έmbártá

3SG-see horse.ACC (two rising accents)

‘he sees the horse’

b. έ-dɔ́l έmbartá

3SG-see horse.NOM (one rising accent)

‘he sees the horse’

The proper terminology to adequately describe the form and function of the ”accusative”, a term that only captures a small subset of the variety of functions of the Arabic naṣb, remains a problem (cf., e.g., Haspelmath (2009)). While the term “nominative“ appears to be relatively unproblematic, one can point out that the term “accusative” represents a semantically narrowed translation of the more appropriate Greek term αἰτιατική by the Roman polymath Varro. As we will see, marking the direct object is but one function of “accusative” or, better: the “dependent case”; other functions include the marking of predicates, focalized subjects, and even the citation form and the vocative. In short: 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 refers to the unmarked citation form in “nominative-absolutive languages”. We will not touch upon ergative systems in this paper, as found, for instance, in modern Neo-Aramaic, even though these could be considered a further development of a “marked nominative” system.