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# Construct forms of nouns in African languages

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I argue that the notion of CONSTRUCT STATE of nouns, traditional in Semitic linguistics, may be relevant to the description of languages belonging to other families, and that extending the use of the term of CONSTRUCT FORM OF NOUNS may help to capture similarities in the nominal system of languages that are not immediately apparent in current accounts. The paper is organized as follows. Sections 2 to 4 propose some terminological clarifications in order to lay the foundations of a cross-linguistic study of morphosyntactic phenomena likely to be viewed as particular manifestations of the same type of mechanism as the construct state of Semitic languages. Sections 5 to 9 illustrate this approach by examining data from African languages belonging to various families. Section 10 concludes the paper with remarks about the variety of scenarios that may be responsible for the emergence of construct forms.

## 2. DEFINITION

In Semitic linguistics, the term ‘construct state’ applies to nouns immediately followed by another noun in the role of genitival modifier, or by a bound pronoun in possessive function. In Arabic, or in Hebrew, this context triggers the use of a special form of nouns. For example, in Classical Arabic, the most general characteristic of nouns occurring in this context is the absence of definiteness marking, obligatory in other contexts, but some nouns undergo additional modifications in the construct state.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Classical Arabic
- (a) *daxal-a*                      *kalb-u-n*.  
enter.PF-3SG.M    dog.SG-NOM-INDEF  
‘A dog came in.’
- (b) *daxal-a*                      *l-kalb-u*.  
enter.PF-3SGM    DEF-dog.SG-NOM  
‘The dog came in.’

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are CL = noun class, DEF = definite, F = feminine, GEN = genitive, INDEF = indefinite, LINK = linker, NOM = nominative, N = negative, PF = perfective, PRF = perfect, REL = relative, SG = singular, M = masculine; numbers preceded by CL refer the numbering of noun classes traditional in Bantu linguistics, otherwise they refer to persons.

- (c) \**daxal-a*      *kalb-u*.  
 enter.PF-3SGM    dog.SG-NOM
- (d) *daxal-a*      *kalb-u*      *l-malik-i*  
 enter.PF-3SGM    dog.SG-NOM    DEF-king-GEN  
 ‘The dog of the king came in.’
- (e) *daxal-a*      *kalb-u-hu*  
 enter.PF-3SGM    dog.SG-NOM-3SGM  
 ‘His dog came in.’

Cross-linguistically, it is relatively common that person markers cross-referencing the genitival dependent attach to the head of genitive constructions. Morphological markers affecting nouns and encoding nothing more than the mere fact that the noun fulfills the role of head in a given type of construction are much less common. However, they are not limited to the Semitic languages. The range of noun dependents triggering the choice of a special form of their head vary among the individual languages that have this phenomenon.

My proposal is to use the term of construct form as a general label for noun forms that are obligatory in combination with certain types of noun dependents and cannot be analyzed as instances of cross-referencing in the genitive construction.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. CONSTRUCT FORMS AND CASE

Case forms and construct forms of nouns are conditioned by the syntactic status of nouns, but case encodes the role of NPs as elements of broader constructions, irrespective of their internal structure, whereas construct forms encode information on the internal structure of NPs. Case is a particular variety of dependent marking, whereas construct forms are an instance of head marking.

Several authors have proposed to neglect this distinction and to consider construct forms as cases, which implies broadening the definition of case to any morphological variation of nouns carrying syntactic information. It seems to me that, on the contrary, the distinction between head marking and dependent marking is a crucial methodological distinction, in describing individual languages as well as in a typological perspective. Consequently, I do not follow the proposal to consider construct forms as cases.

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<sup>2</sup> The reason for choosing construct form rather than construct state is that it is not entirely clear whether, in the Arabic or Hebrew grammatical traditions, construct state primarily refers to the construction itself, or to the particular form taken by the head noun in this construction. This ambiguity can however easily be avoided by using the term *construct form*.

#### 4. TERMINOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Some descriptive traditions use terms that may suggest some analogy with the construct state of Semitic languages, but which in fact refer to very different phenomena. Some descriptions of Berber languages use the term construct state in a misleading way, and the term annexion / construct state has also been proposed for a morphological mechanism found in Gur languages that has no functional analogy with the mechanisms to which these labels are applied in descriptions of Semitic and Berber languages.

In Berber languages, nouns have two forms traditionally termed states. One of the two states is generally termed ANNEXED STATE, but some descriptions use the label construct state, suggesting a false analogy with the states of Semitic nouns. The point is that, contrary to Semitic states, the so-called states of Berber nouns are instances of dependent marking, not of head marking.

In the variety of Tamazight described by Penchoen (1973), the ‘construct state’ is used (a) when the noun is subject of the (verbal) utterance and is placed after the verb, (b) after preposition, (c) in noun complement constructions and after at least certain numerals, whereas the ‘normal state’ is used in all other syntactic environments, and in citation.

In a broad typological perspective, the two so-called states of Berber nouns are cases. It is true that their distribution does not fit into any cross-linguistically common and consequently well-identified configuration, and this is probably the reason why many specialists of Berber languages are reluctant to recognize them as cases. But if one agrees with the importance of the distinction between head marking and dependent marking, then one must at least recognize that the so-called states of Berber nouns are instances of nominal dependent marking, and are therefore functionally more similar to cases than to the states of Semitic nouns.

The term of annexed state has also been proposed by Elders (2003) for a syntactically conditioned alternation affecting nouns in Kulango and some other Gur languages. In the introduction of his paper, Elders explicitly states that he considers annexed state and construct state equivalents: ‘Cette distinction entre état libre et état d’annexion est empruntée à la linguistique berbère (Galand 1988: 229); la linguistique sémitique fait une distinction pareille sous les désignations état construit (status constructus, construct state) et état indépendant.’

In Kulango and other Gur languages, nouns in isolation have an obligatory class suffix (or number suffix, in languages in which the class system is no more active), but they lose this inflectional suffix in certain constructions. However, the omission of the inflectional suffix concerns nouns that are always in non-final position in the relevant construction, but that cannot be uniformly characterized as heads or dependents, since some constructions triggering the omission of the inflection of the first term have the order *head – dependent*, and some others have the order *dependent – head*. In (2) from Dagara, ‘goat’ in the suffixless form is the head of an attributive construction in (2b), and the dependent of a genitive construction in (2c).

- (2) Dagara (Delplanque 1997)
- (a) *bʊ-ɔ* 'goat' (pl. *bʊʊ-d*)
- (b) *bʊ béd-ʊ* 'big goat'  
goat big-SG
- (c) *bʊ zʊʊ-d* 'goat's tail'  
goat tail-SG

In Dagara and other Gur languages showing this kind of alternation, if one accepts that in (2b), 'goat' is the head of an attributive construction, the use of the uninflected noun illustrated by (2b) can be compared to the construct state of Semitic languages, since it characterizes the noun fulfilling the role of head in a *head – dependent* construction.<sup>3</sup> However this does not hold for the use illustrated by (2c). If one accepts to draw a strict distinction between cases (nominal dependent marking) and construct forms (nominal head marking), then the only possible conclusion is that bare nouns in Gur languages cannot be straightforwardly characterized either as case forms or as construct forms.

## 5. CONSTRUCT FORMS OF NOUNS IN EAST AFRICAN LANGUAGES

In African linguistics, construct forms of nouns have so far been identified mainly in East African languages belonging to the Nilotic family (see among others Andersen 2002 on Dinka, which includes detailed references on previous works dealing with this topic in other Nilotic languages). Note however that, in the absence of a generally accepted label, a variety of terms have been used to label construct forms of nouns in descriptions of individual languages:

Such a form also occurs in some other Western Nilotic languages, and in descriptions of those languages it has been variously labeled 'genitive' (Kohnen 1933: 28 on Shilluk, Okoth-Okombo 1982: 32 on DhoLuo), 'appertentive' (Gregersen 1961: 83 on DhoLuo), 'status constructus' (Tucker and Bryan 1966: 83), 'antigenitive' (Andersen 1988: 284 on Pāri), and 'modified noun form' (Reh 1996: 116 on Anywa). (Andersen 2002: 13)

In the same area, a construct form of nouns has also been identified in the Cushitic language Iraqw (Mous 1993).

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<sup>3</sup> One might argue that this is a genitive construction, lit. 'goat's bigness', but class agreement provides evidence against this analysis, at least in a strictly synchronic perspective. Note however that, within the frame of this alternative analysis, the recognition of the uninflected form of nouns as a construct form is excluded even more radically, since the use of the uninflected form of nouns would uniformly characterize nouns in the role of dependent in the genitive construction.

Since the existence of construct forms of nouns is widely acknowledged in this area, it is not necessary to insist on East African illustrations here. The aim of this paper is rather to draw the attention to the fact that construct forms of nouns occur at least sporadically in other parts of the African continent, although they are not identified as such in the descriptions of the languages in which they are found.

## 6. HAUSA

Hausa (Afroasiatic, Chadic) has a construct form of nouns characterized by a suffix *-n* (singular masculine or plural) or *-ĩ* (singular feminine), commonly called ‘genitive linker’. This suffix occurs when the noun fulfills the role of head in the genitive construction as in (3a) and (3c). It must also be used when the noun takes a possessive suffix other than 1st person singular (3e). It results from the cliticization of a pronoun *na* / *ta* co-referent with the head noun in the synonymous construction illustrated by (3b) and (3d).

- (3) Hausa
- (a) *kàre-n*                      *Daudà*                      (cf. *kàree* ‘dog’)  
 dog-CSTR.SG.M      Dauda  
 ‘Dauda’s dog’
- (b) *kàree na*                      *Daudà*  
 dog      that one (SG.M) of      Dauda  
 ‘Dauda’s dog’
- (c) *saaniya-ĩ*                      *Daudà*                      (cf. *saaniyaa* ‘cow’)  
 cow-CSTR.SG.F      Dauda  
 ‘Dauda’s cow’
- (d) *saaniyaa ta*                      *Daudà*  
 cow      that one (SG.F) of      Dauda  
 ‘Dauda’s cow’
- (e) *kàree-naa*                      ‘my dog’  
*saaniyaa-taa*                      ‘my cow’  
*kàre-n-kà*                      ‘your(SG.M) dog’  
*saaniya-ĩ -kà*                      ‘your(SG.M) cow’  
*kàre-n-ki*                      ‘your(SG.F) dog’  
*saaniya-ĩ -ki*                      ‘your(SG.F) cow’  
*kàre-n-sà*                      ‘his dog’  
*saaniya-ĩ -sà*                      ‘his cow’  
*kàre-n-tà*                      ‘her dog’  
*saaniya-ĩ -tà*                      ‘her cow’  
*kàre-n-mù*                      ‘our dog’

<i>saanìya-ĩ -mù</i>	‘our cow’
<i>kàre-n-kù</i>	‘your(PL) dog’
<i>saanìya-ĩ -kù</i>	‘your(PL) cow’
<i>kàre-n-sù</i>	‘their dog’
<i>saanìya-ĩ -sù</i>	‘their cow’

A difficulty in the analysis of *-n ~ -ĩ* as the mark of a construct form of Hausa nouns is that the same suffix characterizes attributive adjectives preceding nouns in the construction illustrated by *fari-n kàree* ‘white dog’ / *fara-ĩ saanìyaa* ‘white cow’ (*fari* / *fara* are the masculine and feminine forms of the adjective ‘white’).<sup>4</sup> In this construction, if one accepts that the first term (the adjective) depends on the second one (the noun), *-n ~ -ĩ* cannot be recognized as an instance of noun head marking. A possible solution is to consider that, when attributive adjectives precede nouns, they take an additional gender agreement mark homonymous with the suffix of the construct form of nouns (and probably cognate with it in a historical perspective).<sup>5</sup>

## 7. WOLOF

In Wolof (Niger-Congo, Atlantic), a construct form of nouns characterized by the suffix *-u* (SG) / *-i* (PL) is used exclusively with nouns combined with another noun in the role of genitival dependent. It occurs with no other dependent, and, contrary to Semitic construct forms, it does not occur with possessives either.

The construct form of Wolof nouns and the Semitic construct forms share a constraint of strict contiguity with the dependent noun. This means that other dependents of the head noun in the construct form must follow the genitival dependent, and that, if the dependent noun itself has dependents that must precede it, they must be placed to the left of the head noun in the construct form, as illustrated by (4).

<sup>4</sup> In Hausa, attributive adjectives occur both before and after the head noun; postnominal adjectives are simply juxtaposed to the head noun: *fari-n kàree* = *kàree farii*, *fara-ĩ saanìyaa* = *saanìyaa faraa*.

<sup>5</sup> An alternative analysis would be to consider that *fari-n kàree* / *fara-ĩ saanìyaa* are *N of N* constructions meaning ‘whiteness of dog / cow’. However, this analysis would imply a rule according to which, in the genitival construction, the gender of the head noun might be determined by the gender of the dependent noun. It is therefore preferable to consider that attributive adjectives can precede nouns in a construction resulting from the reanalysis of a former genitival construction, but synchronically distinct from it (‘Prenominal adjectives in such phrases as *farin gidaa* ‘white house’ probably began as *N of N* constructions meaning “whiteness of house” – Newman 2000: 30).

- (4) Wolof
- (a) *fas*    *wu*    *ñuul*  
horse    CL.LINK    be black  
‘black horse’
- (b) *suma*    *nijaay*  
1SG    maternal uncle  
‘my uncle’
- (c) *suma fas-u*    *nijaay*    *wu*    *ñuul*  
1SG horse-CSTR    maternal uncle    CL.LINK be black  
‘the black horse of my uncle’ (lit. ‘my horse of uncle black’)
- (d) *\*fas-u*    *suma*    *nijaay*  
horse-CSTR 1SG    maternal uncle

## 8. TSWANA

In Tswana (Niger-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantu), the nouns that have a basic tonal contour ending with two successive H tones (which constitute an important proportion of Tswana nouns, perhaps the majority) show a tonal alternation ...HH ~ ...HL that must be recognized as morphological, since its conditioning cannot be stated in purely phonological terms.

In Tswana, ...HH is automatically replaced by ...HL before a pause, but this phonological rule does not account for all cases of replacement of ...HH by ...HL. In particular, when nouns ending with ...HH are in certain types of *head – dependent* relation with the following word, they show a ...HL contour that must be analyzed as the mark of a construct form, since it disappears if the same word occurs in a phonologically identical configuration, but with a different syntactic relation to the following word. For example, in (6a), *sìtswáná* is the head of the NP *sìtswánà sé bá-sì-búà-ń* ‘the Tswana they speak the way they speak Tswana’, and consequently, the contact with the linker *sé* introducing the relative clause triggers the use of the construct form *sìtswánà*. By contrast, in *sìtílò sá sìtswáná sé bá-sì-rékílè-ń* ‘the Tswana chair they bought’, *sìtswáná* is in contact with the same linker *sé*, but the linker introduces a dependent of *sìtílò* ‘chair’<sup>6</sup>, not of *sìtswáná*; in this construction, *sìtswáná* has no dependent, and consequently the construct form would not be correct.

<sup>6</sup> The construct form *sìtílò* is triggered by the presence of the genitival dependent *s-á-sì-tswáná*.



- (5) Tswana
- (a) *χà-kí-rátí*    *sì-tswánà*                    *s-é*                    *bá-sì-búà-íj*  
 NEG-1SG-like    CL7-Tswana.CSTR    CL7-LINK    CL2- CL7-speak-REL  
 ‘I do not like the Tswana they speak (the way they speak Tswana)’
- (b) *χà-kí-rátí*    *sì-tílò*                    *s-á-sì-tswáná*  
 NEG-1SG-like    CL7-chair.CSTR    CL7-GEN- CL7-Tswana
- s-é*                    *bá-sì-rékílè-íj*  
 CL7-LINK    CL2- CL7-buy.PRF-REL  
 ‘I do not like the Tswana chair they bought’

In Tswana, nouns with a basic tonal contour ending with ...HH must take the construct form (characterized by a tonal contour ...HL) when immediately preceding one of the following types of dependents:

- a demonstrative,
- a genitival dependent,
- an adjective or a relative clause introduced by a linker homonymous with the demonstrative (and historically cognate with it),
- the interrogative determiner *-fí*,
- the negative determiner *-pé*,
- *-sìlí* ‘other’.

## 9. MENDE

In Mende (Niger-Congo, Mande), the initial segment of nouns shows a consonant alternation triggered by the syntactic status of the noun. One of the two forms can be characterized as a construct form, since it is automatically used when the noun is immediately preceded by a dependent, whereas the other (the free form) occurs whenever the noun constitutes the first element of an NP, or is used in the absence of any dependent, as illustrated by (6).

- (6) Mende
- (a) *ndopô* ‘child’, *tokó* ‘arm’, *ngíla* ‘dog’ (free forms)
- (b) *ndopó-i*    *loko-í*                    ‘the child’s arm’  
 child-def    cstr.arm-def
- (c) *ndopó-i*    *yile-í*                    ‘the child’s dog’  
 child-def    cstr.dog-def

Most accounts of Mende morphology suggest that the initial segment of the construct form must be described in terms of lenition of the initial segment of the

free form, but I have shown in Creissels 1994: 152-168 that the construct form must rather be characterized by the absence of an underlying nasal present at the initial segment of the free form. A nasal showing exactly the same morphophonological properties but prefixed to verbs represents a third person object pronoun, and comparison with Kpelle shows that, before being reanalyzed as the marker of the free form of nouns, the nasal prefixed to nouns represented a definite article.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The previous sections have shown that, among African languages, construct forms of nouns are found in languages that have no close genetic or areal link. The examples give an idea of the possible variations in the distribution of construct forms (which however variable includes the role of head in combination with another noun in the role of genitival dependent) and in their morphological marking (the construct form may result from the addition of a morphological element to the free form, as in Hausa, or from the deletion of a morphological element characteristic of the free form, as in Mende). Diachronically, they illustrate the variety of the scenarios that may result in the emergence of a construct form of nouns:

- (i) the construct form of Tswana nouns probably results from the morphologization of sandhi tonal processes;
- (ii) in Hausa, the construct form of nouns is marked by a suffix resulting from the cliticization of a resumptive pronoun in a genitive construction the English literal equivalent, which would be something like ‘the dog that.of the man’ for ‘the man’s dog’;
- (iii) in Mende, the construct form of nouns is marked by the absence of a prefix present in the free form that diachronically can be characterized as a frozen definite article.

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