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GOTHENBURG

# A Typological View on Case in Somali

Morgan Nilsson

morgan.nilsson@gu.se

## **Somali – not a case language:**

Hunter 1880; Schleicher 1892; Reinisch 1903;  
Kirk 1905; Moreno 1955...

## **Somali – a case language:**

Andrzejewski 1956, 1964, 1979; Hyman 1981;  
Puglielli & Siyaad 1984; Serzisko 1984; Banti 1984,  
1988; Lecarme 1989; Saeed 1993, 1999; Frascarelli  
1999; Bendjaballah & Cabredo Hofherr 2003;  
Berchem 2012; Lampitelli 2015...

**What do we mean by 'case'...?**

**How can languages be compared?**

## **Outline:**

- **Typological criteria (Corbett 2008 etc.)**
- **Evaluation of the traditional cases**
  - Absolutive (Basic, Default)**
  - Nominative (Subject)**
  - Genitive**
  - Vocative**
- **Summary & Conclusions**

# Canonical Case

Corbett (2008)



# 1. Clear Categories

- a. clearly distinguishable from each other
- b. across numbers
- c. across word classes
- d. across individual words

# a. Syncretisms?

ABS=GEN syncretisms

Abundant, all definite nouns and most feminine indefinite

In general, only indefinite masculine singular nouns have a distinct GEN.

NOM is generally well distinguishable by segmental or tonal marking (no tone=low tone).

VOC is practically always distinguishable.

## A typical feminine noun

‘girl’

	indef.	def.
ABS	gabár	gabár-t-a
NOM	gabár-i	gabár-t-u
GEN	gabár / gabar-eéd*	gabár-t-a
VOC	gabár-yahay	

\*2x hadal gabareed ‘girl’s talk’ in 79M corpus



## A typical masculine noun

‘donkey’

	indef.	def.
ABS	damээр	damээр-k-a
NOM	dameer	damээр-k-u
GEN	dameэр	damээр-k-a
VOC	damээр-yahow	

# a. Syncretisms?

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Abundant, all definite nouns and most feminine indefinite

In general, only indefinite masculine singular nouns have a distinct GEN.

NOM is generally well distinguishable by segmental or tonal marking (no tone=low tone).

VOC is practically always distinguishable.

NB. In our data, the ABS/NOM/GEN tonal distinctions are often not realized as expected. This occurs in all word classes. Should it count as additional ABS=NOM or GEN=NOM syncretism?

'that house'

ABS gúrigíí  
NOM **gúrigíí**

our data  
**gúrigíí**

'house'

ABS	gúri
NOM	<b>guri</b>
GEN	gurí

our data

**guri**

## b. What about the plural?

A higher degree of ABS=GEN syncretism because most plural morphemes have final tone in ABS, only one has penult tone. GEN always has final tone.

indef. pl. ABS	gabdh-ó	libaax-yó	mas-ás	aabba-yaál	<b>hooyo-óyin</b>
indef. pl. GEN	gabdh-ó/gabdh-oód	libaax-yó	mas-ás	aabba-yaál	<b>hooyo-oyín</b>
	'girls'	'lions'	'snakes'	'fathers'	'mothers'

## c. What about other word classes?

GEN doesn't exist in other word classes, only in nouns.

## d. What about individual words?

There are some groups of words that exhibit additional syncretism.

All nouns in -e, -o have two ABS forms, one syncretic with NOM, the other with GEN.  
e.g. ABS=GEN **Sahró**, ABS=NOM **Sáhro**

Women's names with (exceptional) penult tone resist the GEN final tone as well as the NOM no tone,  
e.g. ABS=NOM=GEN: **Máryan**

# Canonical Case

Corbett (2008)



## 2. Clear Syntactic Rules

- a. obligatory use according to simple rules
- b. independent of other lexemes
- c. no additional lexical conditions
- d. no additional semantic conditions
- e. no additional syntactic conditions



# Absolutive

a. obligatory use according to a simple rule

It is easier to tell when it's not used. Default case: in isolation, object, adverbial, some subjects.

b. independent of other lexemes    Canonical

c. no additional lexical conditions    Canonical

d. no additional semantic conditions

Used as **focused subject**.

e. no additional syntactic conditions

Used non-phrase-finally (as "construct state") in any NP, also non-focused subject NP.

# Nominative

a. obligatory\* use according to a simple rule

Used for **subjects** ...

b. independent of other lexemes    Canonical

c. no additional lexical conditions    Canonical

d. no additional semantic conditions

... but **not** if the subject is **focused** ...

e. no additional syntactic conditions

... and only NP finally.

\*The obligatoriness could be questioned. In our data NOM is used somewhat inconsistently, occasionally ABS occurs instead, especially in non-typical word order, or long subject NP's.

# Genitive

a. obligatory use according to a simple rule

Used as **postnominal modifiers**.

b. independent of other lexemes

The morpheme **-ood** is only used when modifying a numeral or a word like 'some, few'

c. no additional lexical conditions

After numerals most nouns occur in GEN.SG, but one type of fem. nouns occur in GEN.PL.

Forms in **-eed**, **-aad** are lexicalised, the suffix may not be freely used with any (fem.) noun.

No DEF.GEN after numerals (otherwise agreement in definiteness prevails in NP's with GEN)

d. no additional semantic conditions

The suffix **-eed** is only used in associative constructions, not in part., poss., subj., obj. constr.

e. no additional syntactic conditions

Only used NP finally (not, e.g., medially in a row of three nouns).

Overridden by NOM if the NP is a non-focused subject.

NB. Different rules trigger each different GEN marker (**-eed**, **-aad**, **-ood**, final tone)

# Vocative

- |  |           |
|--|-----------|
| a. obligatory use according to a simple rule | Canonical |
| b. independent of other lexemes              | Canonical |
| c. no additional lexical conditions          | Canonical |
| d. no additional semantic conditions         | Canonical |
| e. no additional syntactic conditions        |           |

Only NP finally.

# Canonical Case

Corbett (2008)



### 3. Clear Inflectional Morphology

- a. same affixes for all lexemes
- b. in each case there is one, unique marker
- c. same morpheme structure in all cases
- d. stems and affixes are constant

# Absolutive

a. same affix for all lexemes

Only nouns exhibit both segmental (**-a**) and tonal marking, other word classes only tonal marking.

b. in this case there is one, unique marker

Different marking for definite and indefinite nouns (segmental vs. tonal).

Lexemes in **-o/-e** have two tonally different indefinite ABS forms.

Extensive syncretism with GEN.

c. same morpheme structure as (most) other cases

∅-suffix marking

d. stems and affixes are constant    Canonical

NB. In our data, the expected tone is often missing, hence ABS=NOM.



# Nominative

a. same affix for all lexemes

**-u** for def. nouns, some pronouns; **-i** for indef. fem. nouns, adj., some pronouns; **-aa** for present tense relative verb forms; **no tone** for indef. nouns, adj., some pronouns, relative verb forms.

b. in this case there is one, unique marker

Different marking for definite and indefinite nouns (segmental vs. tonal).

Lexemes in **-o/-e** retain, but shift final tone to penult, leading to some NOM=ABS syncretism.

The suffix **-i** is not obligatory for nouns, not much used in proper nouns.

Feminine given names with (exceptional) penult tone resist the NOM no tone rule.

c. same morpheme structure as (most) other cases

Both tonal and segmental marking in the same lexeme.

d. stems and affixes are constant    Canonical

NB. In our data, a tone is sometimes realized in spite of the NOM no tone rule, hence NOM=ABS.

# Genitive

a. same affix for all lexemes

Both tonal and segmental exponents: final tone; f.sg.indef. **-eed/-aad**, f.pl.indef. **-ood**

Only nouns exhibit GEN case forms.

Feminine given names with penult (exceptional) tone resist the GEN final tone rule (GEN=ABS).

b. in this case there is one, unique marker

Many fem.sg. as well as most fem.pl. nouns have two GEN forms, one tonal and one segmental.

Extensive syncretism with ABS: all definite nouns as well as indef. with ABS final tone.

c. same morpheme structure as (most) other cases

∅-suffix marking

d. stems and affixes are constant      Canonical

NB. In our data tone is often missing in indefinite forms, hence GEN=NOM. On the other hand, final tone can sometimes be observed in definite forms as well: **furáha gúrigá** 'the key to the house'.

Also some masculine nouns occur with the suffix **-eed** (**xeerárka afeéd** 'the laws of language'), often serving to derive compounds (**dagaal-afeédka** 'the language war').

# Vocative

a. same affix for all lexemes

Both tonal and segmental marking. Gender differentiation.

b. in this case there is one, unique marker

Three competing markers: a longer and a shorter suffix as well as initial tone.

c. same morpheme structure as (most) other cases    Canonical

d. stems and affixes are constant    Canonical

# Absolutive

Category	a. clearly distinguishable from other cases	NON-CANONICAL
	b. across numbers	NON-CANONICAL
	c. across word classes	CANONICAL
	d. across individual words	NON-CANONICAL
Syntax	a. obligatory use according to simple rules	NON-CANONICAL
	b. independent of other lexemes	CANONICAL
	c. no additional lexical conditions	CANONICAL
	d. no additional semantic conditions	NON-CANONICAL
	e. no additional syntactic conditions	NON-CANONICAL
Inflection	a. same affixes for all lexemes	NON-CANONICAL
	b. this case has one unique marker	NON-CANONICAL
	c. same morpheme structure as other cases	NON-CANONICAL
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# Summing up

Absolutive	weak
Nominative	weak
Genitive	no?
Vocative	strong

Is the traditional case description suitable for Somali?



# Conclusions

ABS is an unmarked default form.

NP's (not words) are marked for case.

Describing NOM, GEN, VOC tone at word level complicates the description.

The different NOM markers do not behave in a coherent way.

# Proposal

Synchronically **no genitive**,  
instead

- (optional) phrase final High tone,
- numerative form in -ood,  
e.g. shán biloód
- derivations (adjectives, compounds)  
-eed (-aad, -ood)  
e.g. bulsháda Soomaaliyeéd 'the Somali society'  
cilmi-aféedka 'linguistics'

# For further research

The interdependency (or lack thereof) between

- tonal and segmental marking,
- the 3 different segmental morphemes for NOM.

Are they really doing precisely the same job?

Intriguing data, especially:

GEN suffixes with NOM tone;

NOM tone where ABS is expected;

NOM suffix -i in adverbial complements of  
time/place/manner, especially clause initially;

ABS (tonal & segm.) where NOM is expected  
in displaced non-focused subjects.

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GOTHENBURG

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[morgan.nilsson@gu.se](mailto:morgan.nilsson@gu.se)