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# On the Non-Canonicity of Case in Somali

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## **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, Oblique, Acc.)**
  - Nominative (Subject)**
  - Genitive**
  - Vocative**
- **Summary**
- **Alternative analysis of Genitive**
- **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 + most indefinite nouns (plural & feminine sing.)

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.

## definite nouns: ABS=GEN

- a. ákhris-ka                      búug-ga  
reading-DEF.ABS book-DEF.GEN  
'(the) reading of a/the book'
- b. búug-ga                      macállin-ka  
book-DEF.ABS teacher-DEF.GEN  
'(the) teacher's book'



## A typical feminine noun

‘girl’

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

\* 2x in 79M corpus, e.g. hadal gabareed ‘girl’s talk’

## 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?

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.

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      **gúrigíi**

our data  
**gúrigíi**

'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'           |

Again, **all** definite forms exhibit ABS=GEN syncretism.

\* On-going shift towards ABS hooyooyín? Accepted by many speakers.

## 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**

In our data, women's names with (exceptional) penult tone often resist the GEN final tone as well as the NOM no tone,

e.g. ABS=NOM=GEN: **Máryan**



ABS=NOM=GEN in women's names  
with penult H tone

a. Máryan way ká heshay buugaágtan.  
'Maryan liked these books.'

(AS9p2851)

b. gúriga Máryan  
'Maryan's house'

(AS1p3439)

Seldom: NOM Maryan, GEN Maryán,  
Sometimes: GEN Maryan

# 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

Default case: in isolation, object, adverbial, some subjects. (Easier to tell when it's not used.)

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

Always used non-phrase-finally as "premodifier form" ("construct state") in every kind of NP, also in non-focused subject.

# 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.

It is easy to find instances of ABS instead of NOM also in relatively well written texts, above all in complex clauses with the subject in a non-typical position.

Also, the exponents **-i** and **-aa** seem less obligatory than the exponent **-u**.

## NOM=ABS

- a. Miyúu Maxamed baabúurkíi arkay?  
Q.he Mahamed.NOM that.car.ABS saw  
(AEA9p208)
- b. Maxámed baabúurkíi miyúu arkay?  
Mahamed.ABS(?) that.car.ABS Q.he saw  
(AEA9p184)
- c. Miyúu arkay baabúurkii Maxámed?  
Q.he saw that.car.NOM(?) Mahamed.ABS(?)  
(AEA9p195)

'Did Mohamed see that car?'

## NOM=ABS

- a. **Cáli wúu cunay.** (AEA2p1439)
- b. **Cali wáa cunay.** (AEA2p1545)  
'Ali ate (it).'
  
- c. **Maxámed wúu yimid.** (MO4p325)  
'Mohamed came.'
- d. **Máryan wáy timid.** (MO4p347)  
'Maryan came.'

# Genitive

a. obligatory use according to a simple rule

Used as **postnominal modifiers**.

b. independent of other lexemes

The morpheme **-ood** is (almost) 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.



## NUM + GEN.SG (GEN.PL)

a. wíil (abs.sg.) ‘a boy’

b. hál wíil (gen.sg.) ‘one boy’

c. labá wíil (gen.sg.) ‘two boys’

d. naág (abs.sg.) ‘a woman’

e. hál naág (gen.sg.) ‘one woman’

f. labá naag-oód (gen.pl.) ‘two women’

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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.

**-eed** not freely used with any noun in any context

- a. íl riy-aád  
eye goat-GEN.SG  
'a goat eye'
  
- b. dhallinyará-da Soomaaliy-eéd  
youth-DEF Somali people-GEN.SG  
'the Somali youth'

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

## No DEF.GEN after numerals

a. tártan baabuúr  
'a car race'

b. tártan-ka baabuúr-ta  
'the car race'

c. shán gurí  
'five houses'

d. shán-ta gurí  
'the five houses'

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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.

**-eed** only in associative constructions

- a. possessive: dhár naág ‘a woman’s clothes’
- b. associative: dhár naag-eéd ‘woman’s clothes’

# Genitive

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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).



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

- a. Áxmed Maxaméd      ‘Ahmed (son of) Mohamed’
- b. Áxmed Maxáméd Calí      ‘Ahmed (son of) Mohamed (son of) Ali’
- c. Áxmed Cáli Maxaméd      ‘Ahmed (son of) Ali (son of) Mohamed’

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Used as **postnominal modifiers**.

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

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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.

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

a. áqal-ka                      macállin-ka  
house-DEF.ABS teacher-DEF.GEN  
'the teacher's house'

b. Áqal-ka                      macállin-ku                      waa      míd wéyn.  
house-DEF.ABS teacher-DEF.NOM      DECL      one big  
'The teacher's house is big.'

# Genitive

a. obligatory use according to a simple rule

Used as **postnominal modifiers**.

b. independent of other lexemes

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

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

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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.

Faadum-ooy

Fatima-voc

inan-ta yar-eey

girl-DEF little-voc

'hey, little girl'

wiil-ka orday-ow

boy-DEF running-voc

'hey, running boy'

# 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** and plural nouns have two tonally different indefinite ABS forms.

## Nouns in –o/-e: ABS has two forms

a. magaálo  
'city'

(AEA7p331)

b. magaaló yar  
city          small  
'a small city'

(MO19p387)

## Nouns in –o/-e: ABS has two forms

- a. Warsamé ayáa-n arkay.  
Warsame.ABS FOC-SBJ.PRO.1SG saw  
I saw Warsame.  
(AEA9p2132)
- b. Waxáa-n arkay Warsáme.  
FFOC-SBJ.PRO.1SG saw Warsame.ABS  
I saw Warsame.  
(AEA9p2046)

## Plural in -o: ABS has two forms

b. caan-ó  
milk-PL  
'milk'

(MO19p1105; MAA1p1302)

a. lyág-u caan-o má cabb-áan.  
they-NOM milk-PL NEG drink-IRR.3PL  
They don't drink milk.

(AEA16p1465)

c. lyág-u má cabb-áan caan-o.  
they-NOM NEG drink-IRR.3PL milk-PL  
They don't drink milk.

(AEA16p1473)

# 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** and plural nouns 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.

ABS=NOM (missing tone)

Béerkii má iibsatay?  
'Did you buy the liver?'  
(MO19p4263)

# 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.

NOM=ABS (unexpected H tone)

Bóqorkií wúu yimid.

‘The king arrived.’

(MO2p1161)



# 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.

Tone often missing in GEN in our data

Genitive final H lacking in 68% of a total of 571 investigated instances.

Typical examples:

elicited data

hál litir

gúriga Muuse

‘one liter’

‘Musa’s house’

expected form

hál litír

gúriga Muusé

Phrase final boundary H

kubbádda míiská 'the table tennis'  
(MAA1p2086)

# 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

Ø-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.

Also, some masculine nouns occur with the suffix **-eed**, often serving to derive compounds.

Also some masculine nouns occur with the suffix **-eed**

xeerárka afeéd  
'the laws of language'

Often serving to derive compounds

dagaal-aféedka, cilmi-aféedka  
'the language war', 'linguistics'.

# 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

|        | m.sg. & pl. | f.sg.  |
|--------|-------------|--------|
| ?DEF   | -(o)ow      | -(V)Vy |
| ?INDEF | -yahow      | -yahay |

or initial tone

# 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 |
|            | d. stems and affixes are constant           | CANONICAL     |



# Nominative

|            |   |               |
|------------|---|---------------|
| Category   | a. clearly distinguishable from other cases | CANONICAL     |
|            | b. across numbers                           | 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 |
|            | d. stems and affixes are constant           | CANONICAL     |

# Genitive

|            |   |               |
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|            | c. same morpheme structure as other cases   | NON-CANONICAL |
|            | d. stems and affixes are constant           | CANONICAL     |

# Vocative

|            |   |               |
|------------|---|---------------|
| Categories | a. clearly distinguishable from other cases | CANONICAL     |
|            | b. across numbers                           | CANONICAL     |
|            | c. across word classes                      | CANONICAL     |
|            | d. across individual words                  | CANONICAL     |
| Syntax     | a. obligatory use according to simple rules | CANONICAL     |
|            | b. independent of other lexemes             | CANONICAL     |
|            | c. no additional lexical conditions         | CANONICAL     |
|            | d. no additional semantic conditions        | 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   | CANONICAL     |
|            | d. stems and affixes are constant           | CANONICAL     |

# 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 H tone,

## Patterns also with other types of NP's

Noun + Noun            gúriga Muusé 'Musa's house'

Noun + Adjective      gúriga wanaagsán 'a good house'

Noun + Verb            wíilka aroosayá 'a boy getting married'

H tone often missing in GEN in our data  
(and in adjectives, and in relative verb forms)

Genitive final H lacking in 68% of a total of 571  
investigated instances.

Typical examples:

elicited data

hál litir

gúriga Muuse

‘one liter’

‘Musa’s house’

expected form

hál litír

gúriga Muusé



# Proposal

Synchronically **no genitive**,

instead:

- (optional) phrase final H tone,
- numerative form in **-ood**,  
shán biloód
- derivations (adjectives, compounds) **-eed**, **-aad** (**-ood**)  
(already Reinisch 1903: 38ff.)

bulsháda Soomaaliyeeed ‘the Somali society’

cilmi-afeedka ‘linguistics’

berri-biyoodka ‘amphibian’

shanaád ‘fifth’

- a. isbeddel-la-da    cod-eed  
change-PL-DEF sound-GEN.SG(?)  
\*‘the changes of a sound’
- b. isbeddel-la-da    cod-eed  
change-PL-DEF sound-ADJ  
‘the sound changes’

# 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:

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

NOM tone where ABS is expected;

NOM suffix -i in adverbial complements / adjuncts

## NOM(?) -i in adverbials of time, manner, place, frequently clause initially

- a. Sid-aas-i                    ayaa-na lo-o                    wadaa                    muddo                    dheer.  
manner.that.NOM FOC-and one.SBJ-in go.on.PRS while.ABS long  
'And you go on like that for quite a while.'

(Korp)

- b. Maxaa aad                    filanaysaan in                    aad                    meesh-an-i                    ka heshaan?  
What you.SBJ hope.PRS that you.SBJ place-this-NOM from find.SBJV  
'What are you hoping that you will find here?'

(Korp)

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THANK YOU!

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