Reflections on Arabic and Semitic:
Can proto-Semitic case be justified?

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From a comparative linguistic perspective the question whether or not proto-Semitic had a functioning case system similar to that in Classical Arabic does not readily yield an unequivocal answer. It is generally agreed that there are Semitic languages or sub-language families for which a proto-case system is plausible, but equally, there are others where such a system did not exist. The issue is, arguably, more interesting for Arabic than for any other Semitic language, since Arabic is a language whose contemporary varieties totally lack morphological case, but whose classical variety had a case system.

In this paper I reiterate arguments I have made before for the indeterminacy of knowing whether proto-Arabic had a case system, embedding it in an expanded comparative look at two Semitic languages, Amorite and Epigraphic (Old) South Arabian. As a spinoff of this comparative discussion one can contemplate ways in which the case system such as described by Sibawaih was instrumentalized out of a system which was not necessarily the system he himself described.

Giving greater due to comparative linguistic arguments than is customary practice in Semitic studies opens the door to a consideration of a number of important aspects of Arabic linguistic history which have hitherto been neglected.

1. Presumptive Semiticist approach

It is a truism in Semitic studies that proto-Semitic had a case system similar to that in Classical Arabic. Brockelmann's compendious *Grundriss* symbolizes this position. If a variety indisputably does not show such a system, it is assumed that it has lost it (1908 I: 460-6). Scrolling through the Semitic languages, there is a fair degree of agreement about which of them have case, and which don't. Section 2.2 discusses the problematic status of case in South Arabian (Sabaean).

Table 1. Case and no case: Semitic languages without and without morphological case

Without
 Geʕez and all of Ethiopic
 Aramaic
 Amoritic
 Hebrew
With
 Akkadian
 ? Ugaritic
With and Without morphological case
 Arabic
 Classical: case
 Dialects and reconstructed dialects: no case
 Ancient South Arabian (as exemplified in Sabaean, see 2.2 below)

1.1 Classical arguments, and their difficulties

The main arguments for reconstructing case are as follows.

If a trait is attested across different sub-branches of a family, it is a proto-feature.

While some scholars assume that the question of the classification of Semitic into sub-branches has been agreed upon – Hetzron's (1975) is a popular claim to legitimacy (e.g. Jallad 2009) - in fact an alternative model developed by Brockelmann (1908: 6) and well profiled in Diem (1980) and Ratcliffe (1998, see Faber 1997, for discussion) remains compelling in certain respects.[1] Moreover, while the role of contact among Semitic languages is recognized, integrating this important factor into the classical classifications has yet to be systematically worked out. All of this to say is that an appeal to distribution across language families will itself rest on having fixed classificatory entities.

A second issue here is what decision is made when case and caseless varieties are distributed across sub-families (by whatever classification). Akkadian stands alone as the representative of East Semitic (case). By Hetzron's classification, Central Semitic would have case, thanks to Classical Arabic, but it also would lack case, thanks to Hebrew, Aramaic and reconstructed Arabic (see 2.1 below). South Semitic would lack case (Ge'ez, South Arabian), but it also might have it (South Arabian, see 2.2 below). Using Brockelmann's divisions the situation remains basically the same, except that South Semitic unequivocally has it with Classical Arabic. In all instances distribution across language families does not unequivocally argue for a case or caseless proto Semitic. The simplest model would have proto-Semitic as being either case or caseless, with one innovation, either loss of case or development of case characterizing a discrete sub-group. Given either of these situations, however, one would have to account for multiple, independent instances of either loss of case or development of case across the different sub-families. Contrary to Hasselbach (2013: 36), no determinant answers therefore emerge from this consideration.

Older is better

A second implicit assumption is that older varieties are indicative of original situation. Akkadian is the oldest attested Semitic language and it had case. However, there is no linear correlation between case and age of attestation. Biblical Hebrew goes back to 1200 BCE, Aramaic to 1000 or 900 BCE, and Ge'ez to 300 CE, all of these considerably to somewhat older than the first detailed attestation of Classical Arabic in the eighth century CE.

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[1] The 'south Semitic' model has Arabic grouped with Ethiopic and South Arabian on the basis of broken plurals, *f = *f (not *p). Even further features which have classically been used to include Arabic with a larger NW Semitic branch should not be automatically seen as a sacrosanct. For instance, Arabic shares with NW Semitic –t 1 and 2 person suffix on the perfect verb. This is a valuable isogloss for Hetzron, since, being the sound comparativist that he was, it allows him to use this feature to define Central Semitic as innovating proto Semitic –ku 1SG/ -t 2 > -t 1 and 2. The problem here is the band of highland Yemeni Arabic dialects which, like Ethiopic, have –k throughout (i.e. have innovated by generalizing –k). Contact with South Arabian is a possibility, though this would be an odd shift, since in all other respects these dialects are 'normal' Arabic dialects (e.g. Behnstedt can seamlessly include them in his dialect atlas of North Yemen). Accounting not for the –k, but rather for the 'normalcy' of the dialects as a whole, the most obvious explanation is that these are relic forms which go back to a time when proto-Arabic itself had innovated in two direction, one towards –t, the other towards –k.

Afro-Asiatic and Semitic innovation

The detailed reconstruction of Afro-Asiatic is a very complicated matter, and until better descriptions of the many undocumented Chadic languages and attendant comparative work become available, judgements will remain provisional. However, there are, to my knowledge, no languages which have the Akkadian/Classical Arabic type case systems anywhere among the 100 + non-Semitic Afro-Asiatic languages, and indeed, it is not immediately obvious that case can be reconstructed for Chadic or Cushitic (and certainly not Berber). Given this situation, case in Semitic needs to be seen as innovative, and one aspect of case in this phylum therefore needs to be an account of where and how it innovated.

Loss of case

Finally, if one will assume that proto-Semitic had case, one expects that the loss of case among those varieties which lack it would be carefully documented. As will be seen in 2.1 below, this is, however, not done.

1.2 Preliminary summary

A preliminary summary of the situation therefore reveals that the postulation of proto-Semitic as having an Akkadian/Classical Arabic-type case system is plausible, though, against Brockelmann and the Semiticist tradition in general, by no means follows from a distribution of case either among the Semitic languages in general, or in the larger Afro-Asiatic phylum. It is equally plausible to postulate a caseless proto-Semitic variety. This leads to the obvious problem of motivating either of these two positions. Note that in Owens (2006/9: 84) this very issue was highlighted and 'solved' by suggesting that "... the proto-language [Semitic] had two systems (two dialects as it were), one with case, one without. I will be developing this perspective in the rest of this chapter."

2. Case in individual languages

The question of whether proto-Semitic had case hinges, inter alia, on detailed examination of the situation in individual Semitic languages. I would like to discuss three languages in this regard.

2.1 Reconstructed Arabic

This short section is essentially a summary of Owens 2009 (chapter 3) and therefore I will be in places programmatic. The main points of this work are as follows.

1. The comparative method is a retrospective method based on *re*construction from attested varieties. In the case of Arabic, reconstruction proceeds from the attested contemporary dialects, backwards

2. There is no evidence from such reconstruction that proto-Arabic had case: reconstructed Arabic had no case

3. In those few attempts that have been made to explain the previous existence of case via the comparative method (Birkeland 1952), alternative explanations are equally, if not more plausible

4. The early Arabic tradition, especially Ibn al-Nadim (*Fihrist*: 7) saw the 'original' state of Arabic as one of diversity, which was 'standardized' by the advent of Islam (the *Qurʔan*)

Comments:

To 2: Birkeland saw the second person object suffix forms in Egyptian Arabic as in *šift-ak* 'I saw you.M', *šift-ik* I saw you.F as reflexes of old case suffixes, accusative/genitive. The three epenthetic vowel values in this dialect are equally an old reflex of these forms. e.g. šuft-**a**-ha 'I saw her', šuft-**u**-hum 'I saw them' and šuft-**i**-na 'you.M saw us'. In Owens (2009: chapter 8) it is argued extensively that the origin of the vowels in –ak/-ik is explained as being a refunctionalization of the epenthetic vowels which are inserted between original *CC-_k. The values –a M (-**a**k) and –i F (-**i**k) are readily explicable via independently needed vowel harmony rules (i.e. < *-ka, *-ki).

To 3: The language of the *Qurʔan*, in this perspective is as much a part of the emergence of a standardized Arabic which is an object that needs independent explanation as it is an independent source of evidence for the state of Arabic ca. 1/622.

To underline the fact that the Semiticist tradition essentially ignores 1-4, a recent treatment by Hasselbach (2013) may be adduced. Hasselbach not only follows the presumptive Semiticist approach in taking case to be axiomatic in Semitic, but also represents one of the very few attempts to account for the lack of case in the Arabic dialects. However, the only evidence she adduces is an implicit reiteration of Birkeland (1952, not actually cited in her work), which as seen above is merely one interpretive possibility, and one whose linguistic implausibility is the subject of Owens (2006/9: chapter 8), as described above. That Hasselbach had little regard for recent scholarship is in evidence in her summary of my own position: "Owens concludes that proto Semitic had no case.." (2013: 69). This is not only factually wrong, even against Owens (1998/1999) which is developed more fully in later work, but simply ignores Owens (2006/9), quoted above, which argues for the indeterminate position of case in proto-Semitic. Note that in ignoring (1-4) the Semiticist tradition not only reaffirms its disregard for basic linguistic methodology, but also fails to incorporate the neither uninteresting nor irrelevant evidence from the Arabic tradition itself,[2] a point I take up in 2.4 below.

2.2 Amoritic

Amoritic is an intriguing 'language' attested only in fragments from other languages written in cuneiform script. A not inconsiderable corpus of nouns designating personal names is available. Amorite was the language associated with the city of Mari on the Euphrates which flourished around 2000- BCE in Central Syria. Amorite itself is attested mainly in personal names in Akkadian cuneiform. While the data base is thus lexically limited, the total token count of over 6,000 personal names

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[2] Again, a point unfortunately lost in some recent treatments of Arabic historical linguistics, as in Magidow (2013) , who reconstructs demonstratives in Arabic without attempting to correlate his results with the evidence from the Arabic linguistic tradition itself.

(Streck 1998: 113) is quite large. It is relevant to note that Grande, following Garbini and Durand, attributes to Amorite a pivotal role in the pre-history of the West Semitic languages (2013: 32).

Nouns in Amorite have four possible endings, -Ø, -u, -a-, -i. This inventory has, not surprisingly, attracted the attention of Semiticists, who implicitly anticipate finding the familiar –u = nominative, -a = accusative, -i = genitive. Indeed, independent of the findings which will be outlined below, both Streck and Waltisberg refer to these endings as case endings (and in this tradition Hasselbach 2013: 37).[3] However, these vowels are neither lexically nor a functionally fixed; one and the same noun occurring in the same functional position can appear with different final vowel. In (1), for instance, *ʔil* 'God' is in genitive (possessor) position, but occurs both with –Ø and –a (Waltisberg 2011: 22).

(1)   *śumu-ʔel-Ø*   'descendant of the god'
        bunu-ʔil-a   'son of the god'

Three recent studies, Streck (1998, 2000) and basing himself largely on Streck, Waltisberg (2011), have given a detailed account of the distribution of these final vowels relative to syntactic function. Waltisberg's (2011: 29) summary table is representative of the results.

(2)   Form-to-function, Amorite

        -Ø A; S; PRED; VOC; GEN

        -a A; S; PRED; VOC; GEN

        -u A; S; PRED; VOC

        -i GEN

What Streck/Waltisberg found is that the Ø ending occurs in the function of subject (of intransitive = S or transitive = A) verb, in vocatives and in genitives, including objects of prepositions. –*a* has an identical function. –*u* has the same distribution, except that it is not attested as possessor or object of preposition. Only –*i* is restricted to one function. Taking a 'non-Semiticist' outsider's perspective, it is clear that one cannot consider these case endings. Looking in both directions, the distribution of the final vowels is largely random (see below): Ø, -u and –*a* can occur in (nearly) any function, and any function can be marked by any of three different vowels (Waltisberg 2011: 28). Waltisberg's conclusion (2011: 30), "The synchronic facts of Amorite show a system of 3 cases *-Ø, -u* and *-a* in any syntactic function..." makes sense only from the perspective of a diehard Semiticist. In linguistic terms, as an initial entry to the issue, free variation, not grammatical marking is what is involved.

Both Streck and Waltisberg consider the possibilities of conditioning factors, phonological, development from a 'marked nominative' system, such as is found in Cushitic, an honorifics rather than a case-marking system, or frequency of occurrence. However, on a categorical basis all run into the same problem as a 'case-ending' solution, namely the vowels are distributed across whatever set of categories define the members of the general class. Waltisberg does point out that certain dependencies can be found, for instance (2011: 33)

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[3] Hasselbach (2013: 290) writes, "The a-case in Amorite is, as mentioned in section 2.2.1, attested for basically all syntactic functions that are found in the Amorite onomasticon."

(3)   1a: S has any marking after preposed PRED -*u*.
        1b: But if postposed S is -*u*, preposed PRED can have any marking.

The problem with formulations such as these is that they are purely of observational nature. No explanations are advanced as to what underlying linguistic factors motivate such distributions. Waltisberg's implicational approach is certainly on the right track, though is best enhanced by a multivariate analysis which operationalizes as independent variables the various individual proposals which have been advanced.[4]

In summary, Amorite also belongs to the Semitic languages without a case system. As will be developed in 2.4, the situation in Amorite potentially has implications for understanding case in Arabic as well.

2.3 Sabaean

Sabaean is classified in Table 1 in the same way Arabic is, having both case and caseless varieties. In earlier work Beeston (1962: 39) concluded that "... it is highly doubtful whether the ancient Semitic case system, as it is exemplified in Ugaritic and classical Arabic, still existed in ESA." The few instances where case forms appear to occur, which will be discussed in detail below, Beeston explained as unproductive vestiges.

In a more recent treatment, however, Stein (2003) in a detailed phonology and morphology of Sabaean argues for a case system. Sabaean is attested between 8th BCE to the middle of 6th CE in modern day Yemen, and chronologically is divided by Stein into three periods, early, middle and late (früh, mittel, spät).[5] As with many early attested Semitic languages, the script is consonantal, so crucial evidence regarding short vowels is lacking. The status of case therefore depends on the suffixes –*w* or –*y*, and in one case, on the interpretation of the lack of the occurrence of these.

In principle –*w* marks a nominative, as in the following, and –*y* an accusative or genitive (oblique).

(4)   *hynmt*   *w*   *ʔx-y-hw*   *w*   *bn-y-hmw*   *bn-w ʔrft̞*
        Hynmt   and brother-y-his and   son-y-his   son-w ʔrft
        'Hynmt and his brothers as well as his sons, members of the ʔrft clan ... (2003: 91)

However, the distribution of these two suffixes is extremely restricted. They are not attested in the lexemes for 'father', one of the diagnostic case marker words in Arabic (Larcher 2010). The word for 'brother' has the form *ʔx-y* before a pronominal suffix, whether in singular or plural (*ʔx-y-hw* 'his

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[4] Waltisberg himself describes his tables as developing a model that "focuses ...on the position of a syntactic element in the clause." Such an explanatory approach, however, is unprecedented among Semitic languages and finds no comparative support among them, let alone in linguistics in general.

[5] Stein reveals his somewhat anachronistic perspective in his remark that Sabaean is, after Akkadian, the second longest continually attested Semitic language, spanning 1,200-1,300 years. Note that the earliest attestations of Arabic go back at least to 328 (the Namaarah inscription) and assuming a ca. 650 dating for the earliest *Quran* (i.e. assuming the received interpretation of the Uthmanic codex is correct), Arabic is attested between 1,350-1,600 years. To appeal to an 'Altarabisch – 'Neuarabisch' division to say there are in fact different 'Arabics' (1) begs the questions of the historical interpretation of Arabic raised here and elsewhere and (2), even allowing for the sake of argument a basis for the claim, it assumes that any differences in Early-Late Sabaean are measurably smaller than those between, say, Classical Arabic and contemporary dialects.

brother', 2003: 50, *ʔx-y-hw* 'his brothers' as in (4)), otherwise only *ʔx*. The –y suffix is especially attested in Middle Sabaic (Stein: 2003: 50). The only word for which an alternation between –w ~ -y is attested is 'son' lexeme, *bn*. Even here, however, it is very restricted, limited to ethnonyms (see (4)), and syntactically only to instances where 'bn' is plural and possessed by a noun. Before a pronominal suffix *bn* is either *bn* or *bn-y*, as with *ʔx* (*bn-y-h* 'his son', as in (4)). Moreover, the –w ~ -y alternation, is attested mainly in Old and Middle Sabaean;[6] and Late Sabaean has only *bn* or *bny*.

(5) Attested morphological variants, *ʔx* 'brother' , *bn* 'son'

ʔx, 'brother'

ʔx-y: before suffixes, in SG or PL

bn 'son'

bn-w: plural, possessed by noun, usually in nominative (Old, Middle Sabaic)

bn-y: before pronoun suffixes in SG or PL (Middle Sabaic) or possessed by noun, usually in oblique (Old, Middle)

Stein's discussion of the distribution of –w, -y is extremely detailed and objective, up to where he states his overall conclusions for case in Sabaean (2003: 97). After conceding that positive evidence for case in Sabaean is precarious, he offers the following Table 2.[7]

Table 2 (Stein 2003: 97)

		Possessed	undetermined	determined
SG	Nom	-u (?)	-um	-u
	Acc	-a (?)	-am	-a
	Gen	-i (?)	-im	-i
Suffix Plural				
	Nom	-w	-w	-w
	Oblique	-y	-y	-y

In fact, however, there are no attestations of the proposed singular marking. This means that to the extent that case *form* is actually attested, the entire supposition that there are formal case distinctions rests on the plural. However, at the very best, these show only a nominative – oblique distinction, as indicated. Thus, as far as being based on actual evidence, Table 2 is better represented as Table 3.

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[6] Stein notes that in the Old period the –w, -y differentiation generally followed expected grammatical conditioning. However, he also notes that there a few cases where –y occurs where –w is otherwise expected. Beeston (1962: 38) notes that in Middle Sabaean *bn-w* is used in a genitive context.

[7] For the sake of brevity I do not treat the detailed exegesis related to the dual or diptotes.

Table 3

		Possessed	undetermined	determined
SG	Nom	Ø	Ø	Ø
	Acc	Ø	Ø	Ø
	Gen	Ø	Ø	Ø
Suffix Plural				
	Nom	-w	-w	-w
	Oblique	-y	-y	-y

The distinctive case system in the singular has no formal justification at all. Note that it is not based on reconstruction, since there is nothing on which to reconstruct. Instead, in Stein's words "…. die hier verwendete Vokalisation orientiert sich am Arabischen". It would be more accurate to say that the singular case system in Stein's conception *is* Classical Arabic, not Sabaean.

As far as the plural goes one aspect of Stein's analysis of Sabaean could be correct, namely that in the earliest period there existed a –w = nominative, -y = oblique contrast. However,–y has three identifiable functions. It can occur before a pronominal suffix in any syntactic (i.e. would-be case) function, it can mark plurality either in conjunction with a pronominal suffix, or before a noun in an oblique function and in later Sabaean, in any function. However, the nominative – oblique plural marking contrast is restricted to the single lexeme, *bn* and to one adnominal position.

(6) functions of –y, -w

-y: marks pronominal suffixation (in SG or PL)[8]
       marks plurality
       marks oblique case before a nominal possessor

-w: marks plural nominative case before a nominal possessor; attested in one noun only

Of the three functions (marking suffixation, plurality, case), the case distinction is the least profiled. –y as marker of possession or plurality occurs with two nouns, occurs before pronouns and before nouns, and it is attested throughout the history of the language. The –w on the other hand, which creates the case contrast, occurs only on one noun, and only before independent noun possessors.

What one can take away from this is that the issue of case in Sabaean remains open, though the preponderance of evidence speaks against a robust, functioning system. Justifying even a scaled-down, nominative – oblique contrast probably requires a more detailed pan-Semitic perspective (see also Retsö 2015 to this point). This hardly deters dedicated Semiticists, however. Hasselbach (2013: 26) reviewing the evidence writes "MASC PL nouns in the CSTR thus distinguished two cases in Old

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[8] To the extent that –y occurs automatically before any pronominal suffix, whether a SG or PL noun, it recalls the automatic insertion of an intrusive –*in* before an object suffix in Semitic (Owens 2013).

Sabaic." This is misleading in the extreme since the entire argument rests on a single lexeme.[9] It is fairly clear why Hasselbach ignores the detailed linguistics of the matter: she later uses Old South Arabian as one argument for a proto-Semitic case system with three values, nominative, accusative genitive (2013: 36). There is no room for scepticism, doubt or variation in the system.

Before leaving this section, it can be noted that Stein's attribution of a fully-fledged case system to Sabaean is different from the reconstruction of dialectal Arabic which argues for the lack of case in the proto-variety. The Arabic case is a straightforward application of the comparative method, with the individual varieties which feed into the reconstruction well documented. For Sabaean comparative data is far more restricted; essentially it doesn't exist. In Stein's system (Table 2) case is provided by *analogy* to Classical Arabic, not by reconstruction.

2. 4 Amorite and Sibawaih

Returning to the Amoritic situation summarized in 2.2, the situation of free variation among *–Ø*, *-a* and *–u* allows one to suggest not so much a parallel with Arabic, but rather to propose, for the sake of discussion, a very different account of 'case' in Arabic, which allows an alternative to the formulation that Arabic had both a caseless and case system.

The basic assumption is that at the time of Sibawaih, ca. 150/770, Arabic had the type of free variation among final vowels as Amorite had. This suggestion is hardly revolutionary. The early 3rd/9th century grammarian Quṭrub already suggested that final nominal vowels were not syntactically but rather phonologically defined (Versteegh 1983). As with Amorite, Arabic also had one dedicated form-function case marker, namely *–i*, which marked both genitive and object of a preposition, but similarly as with Amorite, these two functions were also marked by other vowels. In effect, as with Amorite, Arabic had no case system.[10]

This is where the genius of Sibawaih entered Classical Arabic. Sibawaih was a systematizer par excellence, across all domains of language, phonology, morphology and syntax in particular.[11] At the very beginning of the *Kitaab* (I: 1-6) Sibawaih sets out a number of fundamental grammatical concepts, including the idea that short vowels need to be distinguished in terms of lexical value (ḍamma, fatħa, kasra) vs. grammatical value, i.e. case (rafʕ, naṣb and jarr). This is Classical Arabic as we know it today.

Sibawaih, however, was not, in fact looking at a working version of the idealized case system which is Classical Arabic as we know it. Rather, he saw short final vowels which were, more or less (see below), in random distribution. He also was probably aware of other formal grammatical models,

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[9] The statement is factually wrong, minimally because the system does not apply to *ʔx-y*, as seen in (4-6).

[10] Other works bearing on this issue which need to be worked into the current perspective include Corriente (1971) and related ideas developed by Larcher (e.g. (2010, 2015)) on case functionality, Lancioni (2009) on formulaicity in the poetic tradition, and Sartori (to appear) for the grammatical.

[11] The attempts by Carter (2004: 56-65), Baalbaki (2008: 192) and others to reduce Sibawaih's theory and methodology to that of a psycho-socio-pragma linguist are metonymically fallacious. They take but one aspect of Sibawaih's rich linguistic thinking and turn it into his fundamental theoretical basis. Just as one can, cafeteria style, find plenty of evidence that Sibawaih was interested in speech pragmatics, including speaker intention, one can equally find ample evidence that he was a dyed-in-wool linguistic formalist, as when he goes to great lengths to offer examples which Baalbaki observes "... have absolutely no communicative value..." (2013: 100).

in particular Greek and its case system (Versteegh 1980).[12] In brief, Sibawaih latched on to the formal similarity between final short vowels in Arabic and the final case vowels in Ancient Greek, and assumed that the function of one shadowed the other.

Sibawaih's interpretation of the final short vowels would not have been entirely arbitrary. First, it might be conjectured that statistical biases already favored one vowel over another in different case functions. In the extreme case Sibawaih might, for instance, have noted that –i exclusively marked genitive/object of preposition, thus carving out these two functions as the domain of –i. Other biases might have been inherited from proto-Semitic, for instance –a as a marker of adverbial or locative function (Tropper 1999).

The differentiation of –u/-a is the most problematic since there is considerable functional overlap of the two: both can be subject (V-S=u, ʔinna N=a) and object (topicalization = u, V-O = a). In fact, Sibawaih himself notes many instances of what I have termed "free variation" between nominative/accusative marking (Owens 2009: 90-96). The entire complex of nouns preposed to V can, essentially, be either –*a* or –*u*.

(7) zayd-an ḍarab-tu-hu
     zayd-un ḍarab-tu-hu
     'As for Zayd, I hit him'.

While Sibawaih meticulously describes the formal implications of choosing nominative –u vs. –a in these cases, in the final analysis it can simply be said that either form is equally correct. Besides many similar cases where potential cases of free variation are disambiguated in one way or another by Sibawaih, there are also instances of u ~ a variation where differences are probably of a purely formal nature. For instance, although normally *ʔanna* and *ʔan* govern an accusative or subjunctive respectively, the contrast is neutralized in the case of the 'light' *ʔan* + nominative or indicative (I: 430-1).

In short, the suggestion can be made that Sibawaih took as his empirical input a situation similar to Amorite, and from it created a case system which in part reflected the biases in the input itself, but which was not the structurally unambiguous system which he defined.

It is beyond the scope of this article to take the empirical justification for the current suggestion further. It is, however, not difficult to find further evidence supporting the suggestion made here. In particular, as is well known, the *Qiraaʔaat*, the variant Koranic readings, themselves are characterized by variation across the entire –i ~ –u ~ –a spectrum. The free variation between a final –V and Ø in fact is institutionalized in the al-idɣaam al-kabiir tradition (Owens 2009: chapter 4). Beyond that, there is a great deal of variation discussed throughout the Maʕaaniy literature. Right in his first chapter of his discussion of Q1.7, for instance, Farraʔ notes that ɣayr can be inflected either as –*a* or as –*i*.

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[12] Thus Versteegh (1977: 62-4) discusses the probably non-accidental relation between the Greek *hellenismos* 'declension' and Arabic 'ʔiʕraab'. Versteegh in fact speaks in this work of ʔiʕraab as being a calque on *hellenismos*. Sibawaih himself would not need to have been directly familiar with the Greek system. The idea of the Greek case system could have entered the Arabic intellectual world beforehand and have been passed on indirectly to Sibawaih.

(8) ɣayr-a   al-maɣḍuwb-i   ʕalay-him
     Other than-a   DEF-angered   on-them

     ɣayr-i   al-maɣḍuwb-i   ʕalay-him
     other than-I

'Those whose (portion) is not wrath'.

Again, as with Sibawaih, both alternatives are embedded in a sophisticated grammatical framework: the value *–a* realizes Farraʔ's category qaṭʕ (= ħaal), while *–i* is either an adjective (*naʕt*) or a *takriyr*, agreeing with the word it modifies, *alladiyna*, which is in genitive position (see al-Jassar, 2014 and al-Jassar and Owens 2015 for discussion).

Similarly in Q 2.7 Farraʔ (I: 13) allows ɣišaawat-u-n ~ ɣišaawat-*a*-n

(9) xatama allaahu ...wa ʕalaa ʔabṣaar-i-him ɣišaawat-u-n/ ɣišaawat-*a*-n
     'and God hath set a seal ... and on their eyes is a veil'

The accusative is explained as an object to an ellipted *jaʕala*.[13]

Variant analyses such as these, more often than not entailing different case values, are hardly exceptional in the broad Qiraaʔaat literature.[14] Stepping back from the grammatical discussion, however, what emerges is essentially a system of free variation among the competing forms. Final, largely semantically[15] non-contrastive short vowel variation such as Ø ~ V, -a ~ -i, -u ~ -a is firmly embedded in the Arabic linguistic tradition.[16]

At this point, however, one has moved well beyond Sibawaih to the history of the entire early Arabic linguistic tradition. Sibawaih alone would not have been the only force at work in making sense of an Amorite-type short-vowel system within an emerging, more or less rigid system of grammar.

3. Living with scientific doubt

This brief contribution has concentrated on the historical status of case in Arabic, and in Semitic. From a linguistic perspective, the historical interpretation of case is important because as far as Arabic goes, it is one of the few parameters by which the much assumed but little-documented division of the language into 'Old' and 'Neo' varieties can be ascertained linguistically.[17] It is perhaps

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[13] Though *jaʕala* is supported by the explicit occurrence in Q 65.23 of *jaʕala ... ɣišawaatan*.

[14] It should be noted that the recognition of alternative case forms in the Maʕaaniy literature is embedded in a larger discussion of the analysis of variant functional interpretations, which may be applied to uninflected forms (e.g. relative pronouns) as well as inflected ones.

[15] Semantically non-contrastive in the sense that the choice of one final vowel or another has no effect on the lexical or syntactic interpretation of the word/sentence. Indeed, in the al-idɣaam al kabiyr tradition, it is often case vowels which are targeted for 'deletion', with no effect on the meaning of an utterance.

[16] Indeed, viewing many of the Quranic variants as instances of free variation would 'explain' the fact that the plethora of alternative grammatical analyses are hardly matched by a plethora of semantic differentiation. Whether ɣayr is –i or –a inflected plays no role in the semantic interpretation of the Qurʔan in any of the early exegetical Maʕaaniy works (Axfash, Zajjaj, Naħħaas).

[17] I. e. Bergsträsser's (1928: 156) assertion that there is a set of clearly-defined innovations which differentiate 'Old' and 'New' is simply unsubstantiated against what we now know of the rich variety found in contemporary Arabic. Similarly,

for this reason that a book was recently written reiterating the position that an Arabic-type case system is a proto-property of Semitic, and why, despite lack of compelling evidence, a Classical Arabic-like case system is so readily assumed for epigraphic languages such as Old South Arabian (see 2.3).

What has been shown here, however, is that from different perspectives a case-bearing variety has no more claim to proto-Semitic status than does a caseless variety. There are only two languages, Classical Arabic and Akkadian, for which case can be documented in detail, and even for Classical Arabic there is room for doubt. This conclusion runs against traditional Semiticist assumptions. However, these assumptions are more the nature of postulates, or articles of faith, than they are of linguistically-embedded methodology and thinking. Indeed, as seen above, so ingrained are these assumptions that it is sufficient to 'explain' the lack of case in Arabic by referring to arguments advanced over half a century ago to substantiate the argument that there was a transition from a case to a caseless variety (Hasselbach 2013: 69). Philologists and Semiticists, however, have perhaps an inveterate retrospective vision, which allows them to filter out contemporary discussion of long-standing problems.

What has been shown here, however, is that as soon as one looks beyond the standard reference works, such as Wright (1898, based on the older Caspari – Larcher 2014), it simply does not follow that proto-Semitic unequivocally had a case-only system.[18] Of particular interest in this regard is Arabic. There, the more one looks at the status of case in Classical Arabic and its relation to case in Arabic as a whole, the more potential problems for the position emerge.

Now, historical linguistics is an interpretive discipline par excellence, so there will always be room for re-evaluation of the materials. However, it would appear that in much of the Semiticist tradition one of the basic premises for such a perspective, critical doubt, has been suspended.

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much of Fischer and Jastrow's (1980: 40) list of differentiating features is a list of how Classical Arabic and the contemporary dialects can be different. That a dialect can be different from Classical Arabic is as indisputable as the observation that one dialect can differ from another in terms of certain features. Lists of potential differences become interesting only when they are cast in a comparative linguistic light.

[18] In an odd turn of logic, Hasselbach (2013: 330) in fact suggests that 'Archaic Proto Semitic' had no case (for which position she earlier faults misinterpreted Owens 2006/2009; see above). However, this completely misses the historical linguistic import of such a conclusion. Given it, the historical linguist needs to do on a massive scale what is suggested in principle here, namely to re-examine the pedigree of case in the daughter languages, allowing the possibility that an original caseless variety is merely continued in many daughter languages, including the contemporary dialects.

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