

Articles

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I^cRĀB, TANWĪN AND STATUS CONSTRUCTUS: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF THE NOMINAL DECLENSION IN SEMITIC AND ARABIC

Among the nominal declension patterns attested in the various Semitic languages that of Classical Arabic, as is well known, may be regarded as rather archaic: it preserves both case markers and nasal endings in the singular, otherwise only attested in Akkadian and – to a lesser extent – in Epigraphic South Arabic, but already lost, e.g., in Hebrew and Aramaic. At first glance, this conservative morphological feature fits in with the conservative character of the Arabic phonological system and may be considered, therefore, a simple preservation of inherited forms and paradigms. There are, however, a few significant differences between Arabic and the equally archaic Akkadian which give rise to the suspicion that part of the Arabic declension paradigm is due to later developments and a general tendency to systematization. The most important of these differences concern the endings of the dual and plural on the one hand and the forms of the status constructus on the other. Furthermore, Arabic is the only Semitic language where in the singular a differentiation between indefinite and definite nouns is expressed by the use of forms with and without final nasal respectively, the so-called *tanwīn* or ‘nunation’. This feature, too, deserves to be looked into more closely.

From the evidence of the individual Semitic languages it is possible to reconstruct the following Common Semitic declension paradigm:¹

| | | | | |
|----------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Singular | | Nom. -um | Acc. -am | Gen. -im |
| | | | Obl. -ayn | |
| Dual | | -ān | | |
| Plural | general | -ū | -ī | |
| | distributive | -ānu | -āni | |

The subsequent sections 1-3 are dedicated to a brief discussion of the forms of the three numbers. In section 4 the problem of the status constructus is addressed, followed in section 5 by a glance on the genitive constructions other than with the status constructus; in section 6 some thoughts regarding the emergence of nunation as a means of expressing indefiniteness are presented. Finally, section 7 gives a summary of our conclusions.

1. Singular. The attested endings are:

| | Akkadian | Hebrew | Syriac | Arabic | Ge'ez |
|------|----------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| nom. | -um | -∅ | -∅ | -u(n) | -∅ |
| acc. | -am | -∅ | -∅ | -a(n) | -a |
| gen. | -im | -∅ | -∅ | -i(n) | -∅ |

There can be no serious doubt that the singular endings of Common Semitic were of the shape given above, i.e. *-um*, *-am*, *-im*, preserved in Akkadian, e.g. *šarrum* 'king', acc. *šarram*, gen. *šarrim*. In Arabic we merely observe the sound change from final *-m* to *-n*, yielding the endings *-un*, *-an*, *-in*, a sound change to be observed very frequently and to be regarded as almost trivial.² Equally frequent is the total loss of final nasals, though in this case it should be noted that final *-m* is dropped more easily than final *-n*.³

Accordingly, Akkadian shows a gradual loss of final *-m*, the so-called mimation, already in Old Babylonian texts, the occurrence of forms with and

¹ It may suffice here to treat only the 'masculine' forms since the 'feminine' in *-atum* etc. show basically the same endings, with the exception of the plural *-ātu* which would call for a separate discussion. Cf. also Stempel 1999: 94f.

² Among the innumerable instances cf. English *fathom*, *bosom* with preserved final *-m* vs. German *Faden*, *Busen* or the ending of the accusative singular in Indo-European *-m*, preserved in Latin and Sanskrit but changed to *-n* e.g. in Greek.

³ A good example of this is Latin where from the earliest inscriptions on final *-m* very often is not written while final *-n* is generally preserved.

without mimation side by side being virtually arbitrary (Cf. *GAG* § 63c). This observation will be followed up in section 6.

The total lack of any singular ending both in Canaanite and Aramaic is certainly the result of a prehistoric paenultimate accent with the subsequent loss of final syllables.⁴ In Ge'ez only the *-a* of the accusative is preserved while *u* and *i*, quite in accordance with Ethiopic sound laws, show a development to \emptyset/\emptyset . There is no trace of a final nasal in Ethiopic, which, therefore, must have been lost in a manner similar to the loss of mimation in Akkadian.

2. Dual. The attested endings are:

| | Akkadian | Hebrew | Syriac | Arabic | Ge'ez |
|------|----------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| nom. | -ān | -ʾayim | --- | -āni | -ē |
| obl. | -īn | -ʾayim | --- | -ayni | -ē |

From Akkadian and Arabic we may reconstruct nom. **-ān*, obl. **-ayn*. These forms without final vowel must be assumed because of the Akkadian endings, since there is no example of the loss of a final vowel anywhere in Akkadian so that we have no reason to think that this might be the case here. Hence, Ethiopic *-ē* may simply go back to **-ayn* with the same loss of the final nasal known from the singular. On the other hand, Hebrew *-ʾayim* can only go back to something like **-aymV* with the subsequent loss of the final vowel. Therefore, the most probable reconstruction is that of a set of dual endings nom. **-āni*, obl. **-ayni* for part of West Semitic.⁵ Both Hebrew and Ethiopic evidently have generalized the form of the oblique case. A further difficulty lies in the final *-m* of Hebrew, to be seen also in the plural (cf. below).

3. Plural. The attested endings are:

| | Akkadian | Hebrew | Syriac | Arabic | Ge'ez |
|------|----------|--------|--------|-----------------|-------|
| nom. | -ū/-ānu | -īm | -īn | -ū(<i>na</i>) | -ān |
| obl. | -ī/-āni | -īm | -īn | -ī(<i>na</i>) | -ān |

The two sets of endings attested in Akkadian must be assumed also for common Semitic because one of them has a counterpart in Arabic and the other in Ethiopic.⁶ In Akkadian, nom. *-ū*, obl. *-ī* is used as a general plural while

⁴ Cf. Stempel 1999: 38ff. A detailed analysis of accent-induced sound changes in Hebrew is presented in Stempel 2000.

⁵ A model of the branching off of the various Semitic dialects based exclusively on linguistic grounds is outlined in Stempel 1999: 15-21.

⁶ To be sure, Eth. *-ān* may go back both to **-ānu* and **-āni* and it is impossible to say whether the two endings merged simply by sound change or by generalization of one case which then should be the oblique in view of what we observe in the dual.

nom. *-ānu*, obl. *-āni* is distributional, i.e. it expresses a plurality of individuals, e.g. *šarrū* '(the) kings (as a whole or group)' vs. *šarrānu* '(individual) kings' (Cf. *GAG* § 61 f, i; Goetze 1946). Traces of this latter ending are still to be found in a few examples from Aramaic (cf. Nöldeke 1966: 49f), cf. Syriac *ʿamrā* 'wool', plur. *ʿamrānē*, which we could render as 'several pieces of wool fabric'. The fact that **-ānu/-āni* is preserved in Ethiopic as *-ān* while simple **-ū/-ī* is lost fits perfectly in with the distributive meaning of the former: we must bear in mind that the general plural is replaced by derivational forms, the so-called 'internal' or 'broken' plural, in Ethiopic to an even greater extent than in Arabic. Since the broken plurals are collectives in origin it seems plausible that they replace the general plural in the first place, while a formation expressing a plurality of individuals survives. At the same time, Eth. *-ān* is a good example of the general observation that archaisms tend to be preserved in marginal languages.

In Arabic, on the other hand, *-ū/-ī* is restricted to the status constructus, while *-ūna/-īna* must be explained as a later development in view of the fact that it has no counterpart in any other Semitic language. Taking into account that in Arabic the forms of the status constructus may be described as "status absolutus minus nasal endings", it seems reasonable to assume that *-ūna/-īna* is a back-formation, i.e. a nasal ending was attached to original *-ū/-ī* once the proportion was established; in this case, then, we should rather say that the status absolutus could be described as "status constructus plus nasal ending", giving rise to the emergence of the more "complete" endings *-ūna/-īna* on the model of the singular and dual (cf. below).

Hebrew *-īm* as well as Aramaic *-īm* must also go back to a form with one syllable more, i.e. **īm/nV*, so that the most economic assumption is that West Semitic as a whole had developed the endings **-ūna/-īna* for the status absolutus. While the generalization of the oblique form **-īma* would be in accordance with the same phenomenon in the dual, the final *-m* of Hebrew is more problematic. A solution may be that at a stage when the endings were not yet lost both dual and plural were aligned with the singular by replacing **-ānV/-aynV* and **-ūnV/-īnV* by **-āmV/-aymV* and **-ūmV/-īmV* after the singular endings **-um/-am/-im*.

4. Status constructus

The most conspicuous differences are to be observed in the endings of the status constructus. As already mentioned, in Arabic the status constructus may simply be described as "status absolutus minus nasal endings", cf.:

| | status absolutus | constructus |
|----------|------------------|-------------|
| sg. nom. | -un | -u |
| acc. | -an | -a |
| gen. | -in | -i |
| du. nom. | -āni | -ā |
| obl. | -ayni | -ay |
| pl. nom. | -ūna | -ū |
| obl. | -īna | -ī |

In Akkadian the situation is equally simple in the dual and plural, and the forms seem to be completely identical with the Arabic ones, but in the singular we find totally different forms, one for the nominative and accusative, the other for the genitive, cf.:

| | status rectus ⁷ | constructus |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| sg. nom. | -um | -Ø |
| acc. | -am | -Ø |
| gen. | -im | -ī |
| du. nom. | -ān | -ā |
| obl. | -īn | -ī |
| pl. nom. ⁸ | -ū | -ū |
| obl. | -ī | -ī |

In Hebrew, owing to the loss of *-um/-am/-im in the singular, there should be no difference between the status absolutus and the status constructus, but in fact there is: while absolute *dāb'ār* ‘word’ goes back to **dab'arum/am/im*, the form with suffix *dəb'ār-ka* ‘your word’ can only go back to **dab'ar-ka* for **dabar'u(m)-ka* should have yielded **dəbār'ō-k* because of the penultimate accent of Proto-Hebrew (Cf. Stempel 2000).

The findings both of Akkadian and Hebrew point to a Common Semitic status constructus in the singular with no case/number marking at all, a so-called *casus indefinitus*, a category known from languages all over the world, among them Proto-Indo-European.⁹ This casus indefinitus is used where the noun in

⁷ Following von Soden’s terminology (cf. *GAG* § 62), we use status “rectus” here instead of “absolutus” since the latter term in Akkadian means a form without any case ending, to be found, i.a., in the stative. This form represents what is known from other languages as a casus indefinitus, cf. below.

⁸ There are but very few instances of a status constructus of -ānu, cf. *GAG* § 64 l.

⁹ The term “casus indefinitus” was coined by Böthlingk in 1851, cf. Stempel 1999: 98 with references. The reconstruction of the status constructus as an endless casus indefinitus is what we really should expect from a typological point of view since the status constructus and the

question does not stand in any syntactical relation, i.e. where it does not govern the verb nor is governed by it. A typical residue in Indo-European languages is the vocative, e.g. Latin *domine*, which should rather not be called a case at all since it constitutes a sentence of its own. But also the first member of a nominal compound appears in this indistinct form, cf. the type known best from Greek, e.g. *philó-sōphos*, and still productive in modern European languages in formations with *neo-*, *pseudo-* etc. Other languages, such as Old Georgian, also use a form without any case/number marker when a noun is used as a predicate,¹⁰ and this is exactly what we observe in the stative of Akkadian where the 3rd person singular, the unmarked person or “non-personne” (E. Benveniste 1974: 99), has no ending at all, e.g. *labiš* ‘is clothed’, *šar* ‘is king’, *damia* ‘is good’.¹¹ If this is correct we have to regard the full declension (though without *-n*, cf. below no. 6) of the status constructus in Arabic as an innovation.

5. Genitive constructions other than the status constructus

An innovation of this extent can only be assumed if it is possible to show a model on which it may have been carried out. Such a model does exist in other Semitic languages as well as in Arabic dialects, though not in Classical Arabic and in Hebrew, viz. the genitive construction in which the (fully inflected) noun is followed by a relative pronoun or a noun expressing possession. From old attested Semitic languages we know what may be called the “pronoun type”, e.g. Akkadian *šarrum ša māim* ‘the king of the country’, Syriac *br-ā d-ʔallahā* ‘the son of God’ or Geʿez *tegzit za-bēl* ‘the lord of the house’, i.e. where the following genitive is linked to the head noun by means of the relative pronoun. Most of the modern Arabic vernaculars use nouns expressing possession, e.g. Egyptian (Cairo) *ilbāb bitā ilbā* ‘the door of the house’ (lit. ‘the door possession of the house’) (Cf. Fischer, Jastrow 1980: 93f.), but the pronoun type is also common, especially in Moroccan Arabic *d-, dī, dyāl*, e.g. *l-bit dyal l-mra* ‘the room of the man’¹²

The absence of this type both in Biblical Hebrew and Classical Arabic is in itself conspicuous in view of its otherwise widespread use, but moreover it coincides with the presence of a prepositive definite article in these two

following complement may be regarded as a compound (cf. i.a. Gesenius who in *Hebr.Gr.* § 89 speaks of “eine Art Compositum”) which, in its turn, is characterized by the lack of grammatical features in the first member.

¹⁰ Something similar is the use of an uninflected form of the adjective in predicative use in Modern German, cf. *der hohe Baum, ein hoher Baum* vs. *der Baum ist hoch*.

¹¹ This endingless form was replaced in West Semitic by **labiš-a*, e.g. Arab. *labis-a*, cf. Stempel 1999: 101f.

¹² Example from Heath 2002: XX. These forms are evidently related to the relative pronoun and their use may even be regarded as an archaism, cf. Stempel 2009.

languages, which is one of several reasons to regard a construction like **baytum ša malkim* '(the) house of (the) king' as a starting point for the reinterpretation of the originally relative pronoun **ša* as a definite article (Cf. Stempel 2008).

Independently from whether or not one accepts this latter assumption, on the strength of the evidence it seems quite safe to postulate a genitive construction of the type {noun + relative pronoun + genitive} for Proto-Semitic and, therefore, for Proto-Arabic.

6. The emergence of nunation as a means of expressing indefiniteness

It is quite obvious that the final *-n* of the singular endings of Classical Arabic originally did not convey any special meaning and had nothing to do with indefiniteness. It may suffice to consider a personal name like *Muḥammadun* in order to prove this point since a personal name is inherently definite. As we have seen above (section 1), the loss of final nasals is a rather common sound change, taking place over a longer period during which forms with and without final nasal are used side by side. The question is how during this transition the different forms could be assigned different meanings. I think the solution is quite simple when we take into account the contexts in which forms with and without nunation are most likely to be found. In a construction like **baytun (ha)l malkin*,¹³ the final *-n* of *baytun* is more easily lost than when the word stands independently, yielding something like **baytu-l-malkin*. This may lead the speaker to feel a connection between the definite character of *baytu* and its *n*-less sound shape, so that in the end also *malki(n)*, being definite in the context at hand, is pronounced without final nasal while forms with nasal ending are gradually identified with indefiniteness. In other words: the *tanwīn* acquires a proper meaning by sandhi variants becoming independent. Personal names such as *Muḥammadun* may remain unaffected by this process because of the generally conservative behaviour of names.¹⁴

7. CONCLUSIONS

I. The Arabic declension pattern is *ʔaḥab* only in part:

(a) the endings of the singular differ from those reconstructed for Common Semitic only slightly in that they show the frequent development of final *-m* to *-n*;

(b) the endings of the dual and plural reflect the reconstructed forms with an additional vowel which must also be assumed for Proto-Hebrew.

¹³ We are not going into the discussion as to the origin of the definite article *ʔal*. Cf. i.a. Zaborski 2000 and Stempel 2008.

¹⁴ Cf. Solmsen 1922: 17: "Eigennamen bewahren eine ältere Gestalt als die Appellativa".

II. The full declension of the singular in the status constructus in Classical Arabic seems to be an innovation; originally, at least part of the status constructus forms may be addressed as a *casus indefinitus*, i.e. a form without any case/number marking, which is still present in Akkadian and has to be reconstructed also for Hebrew.

III. The introduction of inflected forms into the status constructus may have been caused by the alternative genitive pattern {noun + relative pronoun + genitive} known both from other Semitic languages and Arabic dialects and, therefore, to be assumed also for Proto-Semitic.

IV. It is reasonable to assume that forms with and without final *-n* were used side by side during a certain time, quite similar to what is observable in Akkadian; the sandhi variant without final nasal may have acquired the notion of definiteness because it was particularly frequent, i.a., in the genitive construction just mentioned.

V. Ethiopic proves a typical marginal language in that it preserves archaic forms in the nominal declension:

(a) the dual ending *-ē* < **-ayn* without a final vowel as presupposed by Hebrew and Arabic;

(b) the plural ending *-ān* < **-ānu* and/or **-āni*, otherwise known only from Akkadian.

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