Syncretism in a marked nominative language
The case of DOM in Taqbaylit Berber

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My talk investigates the intersection between differential argument marking, case syncretism and markedness in Taqbaylit Berber (TB), an Afro-Asiatic language of Northern Algeria following a marked nominative type of alignment.

Cross-linguistically, languages with inflectional case marking obey clear tendencies in their coding of core arguments. One of these is for S to be in the unmarked case form and align with another core argument, either A or O (Greenberg 1966, Dixon 1979, Blake 2001, Bickel & Nichols 2008). The core argument not aligned with S is generally in the marked case. However, it is quite common for A and/or O to surface in different forms depending on their semantic properties, leading to syncretism between different case exponents (Baerman 2008, Calabrese 2008). Where overt or special case marking is restricted to a subset of A and O, these are always functionally marked; i.e. indefinite, inanimate or non-topical for A and definite, animate or topical for O. The two most common types of case syncretism triggered by differential coding are where the marked case (Ergative or Accusative) is realised by the unmarked form (Nominative/Absolutive) or by an oblique case form (Dative, Genitive). Syncretism in which the unmarked form is realised as the marked case form in particular contexts is almost never found (see Arkadiev 2012).

In the functional-typological literature, these regularities are captured by the concepts of distinguishability and markedness, and the Law of Adjacency (Comrie 1979, Battistella 1990, Croft 1996, Aissen 2003, Malshukov & de Swart 2008, Arkadiev 2009, Witzlack-Makarevich & Seržant 2017). Functionally marked A are similar to canonical O and vice versa. They are thus overtly or specially coded in order to be distinguished. Whether the case of A/O is syncretic with S or the oblique case also depends (partly) on functional markedness. Ergative/Accusative = Nominative/Absolutive syncretism is found with functionally unmarked A/O, while Ergative/Accusative = Oblique syncretism is found with functionally marked A/O. The Law of Adjacency stipulates that only cases that are adjacent on the hierarchy NOM > ACC/ERG > OBL can show non-accidental syncretism (Baerman 2008, Caha 2008).

TB challenges some of these tendencies in interesting ways. First, it can be categorised as a marked nominative language (Aikenvald, 1990, König 2008, Arkadiev 2015). S patterns with A and contrast with O (e.g. 1). However, it is the case form of O, the core argument not aligned with S, which constitutes the functionally unmarked form. It is indeed the form used for citation, nominal predicates (e.g. 2a) and left-dislocated topics (e.g. 2b).

(1) a. *yə-ɣli* *wə-qcic* *s* *afus=iw*
3SGM.S-fall.PFV NOM-boy to hand=POSS:3SG
'The boy fell in my hand.'

b. *t-ssarsə =d* *t-mɣaɣ-t* *a-qcic*
3SGF.S-put.PFV=VENT FEM-NOM.old.woman-FEM ACC-boy
'She laid the boy down.'

(2) a. *d* *a-mcic*
COP ACC-cat
'It is a cat.'

b. *a-qcic* *nni,* *pi-ɣ=t=id* *dg fus=iw*
ACC-boy DEM take.PVF-1SG=ACC.3SGM=VEN in hand=POSS.1SG
'This boy, I carried him in my hands.'

TB also displays differential marking of O arguments which are definite, specific and topical (Belkadi & Ben Si Said 2017). DOM is quantitatively rare and specified both on the argument itself and by agreement on the verb. Crucially, in such contexts, O is obligatorily realised in the nominative form (3), giving rise to a syncretism in which the unmarked case is realised by the core marked case.

(3) a. y-swa=t u-yifk nni
3SGM.S-drink.PFV=3SGM.O NOM-milk this
'He drank the milk.'

b. **y-swa=t a-yifk nni*
3SGM.S-drink.PFV=3SGM.O ACC-milk this
'He drank the milk.'

In the talk, I will describe in more detail the case system of TB and this non-canonical case syncretism. I will show that, from a cross-linguistic point of view, TB is unique in displaying an Accusative = Nominative syncretism in marked rather than unmarked contexts. However, this syncretism is a result of the morphology of TB and can be easily explained by the reverse markedness pattern the language follows and its 'poor case system' (Arkadiev 2008). I will show that at the syntactic and semantic levels, DOM in Taqbaylit obeys the 'constraints' put forth in the functional-typological literature. There is indeed a direct correlation between the degree of functional markedness of O and its morphological marking. Thus, while topical and definite O may be marked, non-topical and indefinite O cannot occur in the (marked) nominative form (4, 5, 6).

(4) a. *lawan n zit, a n-ruh a n-lqed a-zmur*
time of oil IRR 1PL-go.AOR IRR 1PL-pick.up.AOR ACC-olive
'At the time of oil, we would go to pick-up olives.'

b. **lawan n zit, a n-ruh a=t n-lqed u-zmur*
time of oil IRR 1PL-go.AOR IRR=3SGM.O 1PL-pick.up.AOR NOM-olive
'At the time of oil, we would go to pick-up olives.'

(5) a. *dacu i t-yuɣ-əd?* What did you buy?
b. *yu-ɣə=d taqəndurt.*
buy.PFV-1SG =VENT dress.ACC
'I bought a dress.'

(6) a. *dacu i t-ččə-mt?* What did you eat?
b. *?n-ččа=tt cərba i t-əpə-d*
1SG-eat.PFV=3SGF.O soup.NOM REL 2SG-cook.PFV-2SG
'We ate the soup that you cooked.'

Second, even though marked O surface in the same form as A, the distinction between the two types of arguments can be made by the agreement/clitic on the verb, which is obligatory in DOM contexts (7).

(7) *y-swa=*ø u-yifk nni*
3SGM.S-drink.PFV NOM-milk this
'He drank the milk.'

Finally, Taqbaylit obeys the Law of Adjacency, since accusative and nominative are adjacent cases on the hierarchy. Still, from a theoretical point of view, the Taqbaylit data shows the autonomy of morphology and supports the need to distinguish between morphological exponence and morphosyntactic features.