

A case against African case?*

Review of *Case in Africa* by Christa König (Oxford University Press, 2008)

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Victor Manfredi, Boston University

In this book, a Nilo-Saharan and Khoe-San specialist surveys “roughly 100 African languages” (dust jacket copy) in order to query perceived “under-representation of Africa with regards to case” (p. 3). The goal explains the title, as if to find case in Africa is surprising, however I will argue that the expectations of traditional Aristotelian case taxonomy are so procrustean, as to fail to appreciate the richness of case in natural language. The problem is exemplified in African languages, whose systematic structural cases are ignored in the book.

To start with, anything called “X in Africa” is bound to come with major gaps. According to Greenberg (1963a), the African landmass has four indigenous language families, whose external boundaries established by his trademark mass lexical comparison have proved highly robust, even as their internal subgroupings continue to elude consensus as classical *Stammbäumen*. Approximately from south to north, the families are Khoe-San, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic. Of these, Afro- earned its -Asiatic about 6000 years ago, when emigrants planted the Semitic branch in Mesopotamia, Arabia and the Levant, then the picture blurred some more when two Semitic-speaking groups ‘returned’: one across the Red Sea to Ethiopia about 2800 years ago (Kitchen & al. 2009) and another through the Maghreb with the Muslim lingua franca in the past 1500 years. By taking intellectual responsibility for the Ethiopian backwave but not for the Maghrebi, *Case in Africa* sticks to the standard, ‘subsaharan’ silhouette—a Black vs. Arab’ divide originally projected by colonial anxieties about ‘race’ and language mixture (Meinhof 1912, Seligman 1930) and eventually inscribed into the mental wallpaper of Africanist institutes.¹ But given the book’s light treatment of Niger-Congo (to be discussed below), plus the author’s considered judgement that “Khoisan [sic] is the only African phylum where there is no one case language” (p. 273), it would have been more transparent—and more than enough to justify publication—to present the study as a review of Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic (minus Arabic, if you insist).

Other gaps are due, less to geopolitics than to epistemology, making it hard to read the book without fretting over definitions. The author endorses Blake’s (1994) traditionalist view of case (p. 5), in effect as noun inflection performing a “discriminatory function” (Comrie 1981, 117) among co-arguments. This classic prototype gets stretched at various points in the book to encompass “adpositions, tone and accent” which serve as argument marking in some languages, and such liberalization is clearly justified by the facts, but somehow is not enough reason for the author to rethink Blake’s conservative premises. Thus, the interesting extras remain in the squishy penumbra of secondary “manifestations of case... in languages which do not have grammaticalized case” (p. 5), which leaves much of Africa as *terra nullius* as far as case is concerned. Some of this continental emptiness is re-enforced by a second-order apriori: the book cites few Niger-Congo sources, and this cannot be unrelated to the fact that nothing is taken from generative literature. This is surprising because Niger-Congo has been intensely studied by formalists (Bāmgbóšé 1995, 11), but it’s also predictable because the ‘unmarked’ literature on typology (so to say) remains functionalist, preserving Comrie’s “rejection” of generative grammar and favoring “surface structure universals, i.e. ...universals which require only a minimum of abstract analysis” (1981, 4, 13).² But this won’t do. Comrie never says how much abstraction is just enough, and his other pronouncement on the matter sounds equally quaint: “In principle one could argue that this should lead to study of the detailed transformational-generative grammars of a number of languages, but given the limitations on resources devoted to linguistic research, in practice this is not feasible” (1981, 4). On the contrary, generative studies have been feasible enough to raise mountains of original Niger-Congo data, especially in works by speakers themselves.³ My main goal in this review will be to signal one or two relevant generative results.

* In memory of Prof. P. Ákújuṣòbì Nwáchukwu (1941-2009), exacting syntactician and steadfast trade unionist. Thanks to A. Nevins for critical comments, and apologies to Fillmore (1968) for the thematic title of this review.

1. The *Dipartimento di Africa e paesi arabi* http://www.unior.it/index2.php?content_id=227&content_id_start=1 at L’Orientale di Napoli is an exception. The dichotomy is ripe for academic retirement, having been rendered indefensible by its instrumentality in conflict zones like Darfur (Mamdani 2009) and having been made irrelevant by fine-grained genomic demography (Cavalli-Sforza 2000; Tishkoff & al. 2009). Luckily a Pan-African alternative exists, and not just according to Colonel Gaddafi (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7588033.stm>). The North American Annual Conference on African Linguistics (acal.rutgers.edu) routinely accepts papers on Arabic, West African English and even Afrikaans. (For much of the 1980’s Afrikaans was not admitted to the conference, during the U.N. boycott of the *Apartheid* regime.)

2. For the record, other kinds of functionalism exist, even generative (Kuno 1987).

3. Comrie’s caricature of Greenberg-style versus Chomsky-style typology (1981, 12f.) glosses over Greenberg’s expressed concern for the generative-friendly notion of “ ‘possible human language’ which... in far more inchoate form in fact guides and informs effective linguistic field work” (1970, 15).

Those African languages not fallen into the aforementioned lacunae are sorted by the author into three broad taxa: standard accusative and ergative (chapters 2 and 3) plus a “marked nominative” type (chapter 4) which is treated by the author (p. 9 citing Dixon 1994) as a variant of accusative (I will return to this point). Alignment splits by definiteness, person, aspect, tense and modality are carefully noted along the way, with secondary data handled at high philological standards, then all the labels are summed up in an encyclopedic chart (pp. 293-301) and coded map (p. 291). However, the visual impression of areal phenomena is not substantiated. The author points to “an abundance of case inflections” in a subcontinent spanning “Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya and Uganda” (p. 283), but on second thought this is less informative. Almost all the “grammatical case” languages apprehended by classical taxonomy turn out to be either Nilo-Saharan or Afro-Asiatic, and the alleged hotspot appears just where these two families are thickest on the ground, therefore some statistical or historical justification is required before jumping to the conclusion that said “abundance of case” represents more than the coincidence of independent properties. Three more “areal phenomena” (p. 283f.) are claimed, also involving zones of Nilo-Saharan/Afro-Asiatic adjacency but on a smaller scale, limited to Ethiopia, and once again a logical step is missed, namely a testable scenario of borrowing or other convergence. Unfortunately, the controversial status of the Ethiopian *Sprachbund* (Tosco 2000, Bisang 2006) is not disclosed to the reader.⁴ Maybe Meillet (1925) was right after all, and morphology is intrinsically unborrowable. The map also misleads in another way: the hotspots depend on a figure-ground perception of surrounding emptiness, but the latter would be filled-in under different criteria of case and assuming more willingness to read Niger-Congo literature.

Short of surrendering to paradigm incommensurability (Kuhn 1962), we may want to reconsider the “special phenomena” identified in chapter 5 in more abstract terms—an exercise which is not only interesting on its own, but suggests reasons to promote these instances from “marginal” to central as far as typology goes. The author points to four such phenomena, and all are less exotic than the taxonomic eye suspects. Referential “tonal case” (Schadeberg 1986, Blanchon 1999) in Niger-Congo (§5.1) depends on the nominal ‘pre-prefix/augment’ whose distribution tracks syntactic phrasing widely in Niger-Congo (Oyèláràn 1972, Progovac 1993, Marten & Kula 2008, Kaji 2009, Choti 2009, Buell 2009). The absence of morphological case on indefinite or nonspecific arguments features not only in Afro-Asiatic (§5.2) but also in Hungarian, Finnish and Turkish (Szabolcsi 1987; Vainikka 1989; Enç 1991). The “no case before the verb” pattern, found in several African language families (§5.3), looks like the prototype of caseless (i.e. GB era, pre-Mahajan) A-bar positions in the clausal left periphery (Brody 1990, Cinque 1990). The recoding in Khoe-San of topic as subject, and of focus as object (§5.4) approximates the ambiguous functional and structural mappings of nominal particles in Japanese and Korean (Kuno 1973; Yoon 2005). I’ll conclude this review with two ‘marginal’ (not!) illustrations of my own, each displaying overt syntactic case, and together standing-in for many similar situations across Niger-Congo.

Ìgbo is inconclusively handled in the book (§5.1.2), but unnecessarily so.⁵ Ever since the thorough and insightful descriptive grammar by Green & Ígwè—whose painstaking printing was farmed out from Oxford to East Berlin, after being delayed to 1963 by confessional orthography disputes—Ìgbo has been known to possess two types of finite affirmative inflection, each with a distinctive prosodic pattern affecting the predicate root and any internal argument (clitic or independent phrase). Keeping to the minimum of facts to make the point here, notice the contrast in (1) versus (2) whereby the lexical items glossed ‘boil’ and ‘animal/meat’ are pronounced differently: in the respective paradigms, the root is [L] versus [H], and the nominal is [HH] versus [H!H]. This contrast is not only systematic for all Ìgbo roots and nominals—modulo lexical details—it is more than just a matter of tonal phonology, because there is a strictly correlated syntactic-pragmatic difference: the internal argument is obligatory in (1) but optional in (2), as shown by the (c) examples.⁶ In effect, the paradigm in (2) is intransitive—some would say antipassive—which is why the notional object is optional and needs genitive case if expressed. Ìgbo grammarians register this crucial property by saying that the paradigm in (2) is built by

4. The earlier of these articles poses the stronger challenge to areal analysis of casemarkers in Ethiopia. Bennett’s (1974) frankly speculative note about case borrowing by Nilo-Saharan from Afro-Asiatic would be relevant, but is cited (p. 188) only for changes internal to Afro-Asiatic.

5. The author relies on a conference paper (Échèrúó 1998a) by a theorist of English literature (1973, 1978) whose main venture in Ìgbo language studies is a (1998b) attempt to replace the 1961 Ìgbo orthography for vowels. Although the author finds Échèrúó’s description “unclear” enough to require “[m]ore evidence” (p. 222), she cites no standard studies. Green & Ígwè discuss “tonal behaviour” of “the grammatical relationships of nouns” including “subject”, “object” and “genitive” (1963, 19-26), while their teacher Ward characterized the same alternations in terms of morphological selection of a “first” and “second tone” (1936, 21) analogous to the “absolute” and “construct state” in Semitic. The contrast between (1a) and (2a) is treated in mixed phonological and syntactic terms by Welmers & Welmers (1968), Voorhoeve & al. (1969), Welmers (1970), Williams (1976), Goldsmith (1976), Éménanjo (1978), Williamson (1986) and Clark (1990), while the difference between (1c) and (2c) is observed by Winston (1973), Nwáchukwu (1976) and Éménanjo (1981).

6. Another pragmatic difference, relevant here, is the semantic scope of bare noun arguments (Déchaine & Manfredi 1998). Similar contrasts are observed much further to the east in Benue-Kwa, where they have received various labels such as “conjoint vs. disjoint” as to the type of prosodic-cum-semantic boundary between a verb and its object (Meeusen 1959).

suffixing inflection to a “participle” (Éménanjo 1984, 27), but this term should not be misinterpreted to suggest that the form, as in Latin, needs auxiliary support (Éménanjo 1978, 129) in order to form a freestanding clause.⁷

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(1)a. Ó sì-ri ánụ.
3S boil-FIN animal
[H LL HH]
‘S/he cooked {some/the} meat (in a pot)’</p> | <p>(2)a. Ó sí-e-le anụ.
3S boil-TEL-PPF animal.GEN
[H !HHH H!H]
‘S/he has by now cooked {some/the} meat (in a pot)’</p> |
| <p>b. Ánụ sì-ri n’òkụ.
animal boil-FIN at-fire
[HH LL HH]
‘Some meat is cooking (in a pot) on the hearth’</p> | <p>b. ò-sí-si anụ
NOM-RED-boil animal.GEN
[L-H-H H!H]
‘meat-cooking (in a pot)’</p> |
| <p>c. *Ó sì-ri.
3S boil-FIN
[H LL]</p> | <p>c. Ó sí-e-le.
3S boil-TEL-PPF
[H !HHH]
‘S/he has by now cooked (something appropriate in a pot)’</p> |

Choice of labels aside, it follows from the above that Ìgbo “tonal case” does indeed serve as a reliable cue to “grammaticalized case, which is manifested by... inflectional means, consisting of a paradigm of cases” (p. 17). And if this goes for Ìgbo, it applies *a fortiori* elsewhere in eastern Niger-Congo where similar facts are found. Crucially however, the basis for this conclusion is not found exclusively within the realm of prosodic marking, but relies on the correlation with other contrasts such as transitivity, determined in the syntax. Obviously such a re-evaluation of the evidence for case will rewrite the typological map of Africa presented in this book.

Yorùbá teaches a similar lesson, most obviously through its choices of cased pronouns in different paradigms. Again this seems to go beyond what the author is prepared to accept, given (i) the total absence of Yorùbá from *Case in Africa* as well as (ii) the author’s classification of Nilo-Saharan “Kanuri and Tubu as [only] marginal case languages” (p. 57) despite the acknowledged fact that they do possess cased pronominal forms.⁸

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>(3)a. Ọmọ pupa.
child.FIN red
[MH MM]
‘The child is tan in complexion’</p> | <p>(4)a. ọmọ pupa
child red
[MM MM]
‘a/the tan-complexioned person’</p> |
| <p>b. Mo pupa.
1S.NOM red
[M MM]
‘I’m tan in complexion’</p> | <p>b. Mi ò pupa.
1S NEG red
[M L MM]
‘I’m not tan in complexion’</p> |
| <p>c. Mo rí ọmọ.
1S.NOM see child
[M H MM]
‘I {saw/have seen} the child’</p> | <p>c. Ọmọ ò pupa.
child NEG red
[MM L MM]
‘The child isn’t tan in complexion’</p> |
| <p>d. Ọmọ rí mi.
child.FIN see 1S
[MH H M]
‘The child {saw/has seen} me’</p> | <p>(5)a. [1S, FIN] → [mo] (n.b., elsewhere [mi])
[FIN] → [H]</p> <p>b. [IRR] → *[FIN] (n.b., NEG ∈ IRR)</p> |

The realis (e.g. plain affirmative) paradigm in (3) qualifies Yorùbá for the author’s “marked nominative” type: the subject has a special clitic (*mo*) or else H tone, and the object has the corresponding general clitic (*mi*) or else zero. As she notes (p. 9 citing Comrie 1981, 119), this violates Greenberg’s (1963b) Universal 38 even if reanalyzed as “extended ergative”.⁹ There’s also a modality split: no inflection in the irrealis (e.g. negative) paradigm (4).

7. Ìgbo tonemarking: [´] = high, [˘] = low, no mark = same as preceding syllable; sequence of two high marks = downstep [!] before the second one (cf. Swift & al. 1962, Welmers & Welmers 1968, Nwáchukwu 1976). A different convention is adopted by Green & Ígwè (1963), Williamson (1972) and Éménanjo (1981). Glosses: FIN ‘finite’, TEL ‘telic’, PPF ‘present perfect’, GEN ‘genitive’, NOM ‘nominalization’, RED ‘reduplication’, nominative unmarked.

8. Yorùbá tonemarking: [´] = high, [˘] = low, no mark = mid. Glosses: NOM ‘nominative’, FIN ‘finite’, NEG ‘negative’, IRR ‘irrealis’. The contrast illustrated in (3) and (4) is quite systematic, as discussed by Bámgbóṣé (1966, 33-35, 69), Awóbùluyì (1979), Oyèláràn (1982), Awóyalé (1983) and Déchaine (1992, 1995).

9. Bittner & Hale (1996) give independent, syntactic reasons to prefer an ergative analysis, in Basque and in general.

Yorùbá inflection can be captured with ordered spellout rules (5a) exploiting the device of derivational economy a.k.a. Pandit Paṇini's "elsewhere condition" (Kiparsky 1973). This is because cased clitics include synthetic forms like *mo* '1S' which prevent independent realization of [FIN] as [H], thanks to lexical blocking (Williams 1981). The modality split, with [FIN] blocked in negative and other irrealis clauses, can be expressed in the same way, but I've stated it less elegantly in (5b) to avoid presenting a bigger fragment of Yorùbá.

The foregoing *syntactic* analyses of case in these two Niger-Congo languages may happen to be *generative*, but the two properties don't correlate necessarily. Seventy years ago, Jakobson had already given a *structuralist* syntactic analysis of case, building on the observation that dedicated morphological marking, as required under functionalist accounts, necessarily fails in privative oppositions—binary contrasts with one unmarked member:

C'est justement sur 'l'opposition de quelque chose avec rien', c'est-à-dire sur l'*opposition contradictoire* selon la terminologie de la logique formelle, qu'est basé l'agencement du système grammatical... (Jakobson 1939/1971, 213, *emphasis original*) [It is precisely on the basis of 'the contrast between something and nothing', i.e. on what formal logic calls *contradictory opposition*, that the grammatical system operates...]

This point is vital where case is concerned, and Chapter 1 of *Case in Africa*—citing the eminent structuralist Creissels (2004) to the same effect—richly illustrates the tendency across unrelated languages for nominative and absolutive to be unmarked in contrast to accusative, ergative and oblique, all of which strongly tend to have overt exponence.¹⁰ While there may be many ways to understand this systematic bias in natural language, traditional/functional taxonomy is not one of them, at least as far as Africa is concerned.

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10. Jakobson himself did not always see the marking asymmetry as intrinsic, and held on the contrary that "[l]a distinction entre le nominatif et l'accusatif démontre le caractère purement arbitraire du rapport entre 'l'opposition de quelque chose avec rien' sur le plan des signifiés, et l'opposition du même ordre sur le plan des signifiants." (1939/1971b, 214) [The distinction between nominative and accusative proves the purely arbitrary character of the relation between 'the contrast of something with nothing' on the level of significations, and on the level of signifiers.] However the intrinsically unmarked character of nominative is explicitly claimed in the summary schema of his 1936 study (= 1971a, 66).

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