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# Case and proto-Arabic, Part I<sup>1</sup>

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It is a fundamental point of comparative and historical linguistics that genealogical affiliation can only be established on the basis of concrete linguistic features, the more central the feature the more important for classificatory purposes. While there is no absolute consensus about how a central linguistic feature be identified, it can be taken as axiomatic that long-term reconstruction and classification rests most fundamentally on phonological and morphological criteria. Of these two, Hetzron (1976b) has argued that it is the morphological which is the most important because morphology represents the level of grammar that is both more complex and more arbitrary in the sense that the sound-meaning dyad has no natural basis. Precisely this arbitrariness ensures that morphological correspondences are relatively unlikely to be due to chance.

Though Hetzron's principles of genetic classification are surely coloured by his experience in comparative Semitic and Afroasiatic, where there are striking morphological correspondences to be found between languages widely separated both geographically and diachronically (see 2 below), his principle of morphological precedence, as it can be dubbed, may be taken as a general working hypothesis. Unquestionably, morphological case belongs potentially to the basic morphological elements of a language. Whether morphological case belongs to the basic elements of a language family is, of course, a question requiring the application of the comparative method. In Niger-Congo, for example, case apparently does not belong to the proto-language,<sup>2</sup> whereas in Indo-European it is a key element of the proto-language (Antilla, 1972: 366). In Afroasiatic, to which Arabic belongs, the status of case in the proto-language is, as yet, undecided. None the less, the assumption of a case system within at least some branches of the language family, Semitic in particular (Moscati *et al.*, 1980), has had consequences both for the conceptualization of relations within Semitic and for the reconstruction of the proto-language for the entire family. Given the as yet uncertain status of morphological case at the phylum level, I believe a critical appraisal of its status at all genealogical levels to be appropriate. Within this perspective I seek here to elucidate the interplay between case conceptualization and the reconstruction of one proto-variety, namely Arabic. Given the importance of Arabic within Semitic, conclusions reached regarding this language will have consequences for the sub-family and beyond, as I will attempt to show.

The paper consists of five parts. Sections 1–3 appear in Part I, sections 4, 5 in Part II. In section 1, I set the stage by reviewing the basic genealogical concepts which have been employed to describe the evolution of Arabic—Old Arabic, Altarabisch, Neuarabisch and the like. In section 2, I briefly review the status of case in the various branches of Afroasiatic. Here it will be seen that a case system is not self-evidently a property of the entire phylum. In section 3, I turn to case in Classical Arabic, *inter alia* considering the descriptive work of Sibawaih, who, I believe, was instrumental in defining the nature of

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Mauro Tosco for his stimulating comments of an earlier version of this paper, and for being an agreeable critic to disagree with.

<sup>2</sup> In an overview of Niger-Congo languages edited by Bendor-Samuel of the ten or so Niger-Congo families, only the Ijoid languages appear to have some case marking (1990: 115). My colleagues at Bayreuth, Gudrun Mische and Carl Hoffman, both with long experience in Niger-Congo, inform me that it is very unlikely that case belongs to the proto-language.

Classical Arabic. Finally, in sections 4 and 5 I consider the evidence for case in the modern Arabic dialects, addressing in particular the question of whether the dialects should be seen as being the offspring of a case-bearing variety, and if not, whether caseless varieties are innovative or go back to a caseless form of proto-Semitic.

### 1. *Proto-Arabic and its problems*

Proto-Arabic has yet to be adequately conceptualized, either by Arabicists or by Semiticists. A basic explanation for this, I believe, is the failure to draw the modern dialects into any meaningful attempt to reconstruct proto-Arabic. Three reasons play a role in this failure. The first has to do with the relationship between Classical Arabic and the modern dialects, in particular, the fact that the modern dialects have no official legitimization in the Arabic world. To set the two on an equivalent basis, which is what a dispassionate comparativist account must do (see Part II, sections 4, 5), could be interpreted as calling into question the asymmetric diglossic relationship (Ferguson, 1959a) between the high Classical (or Modern Standard) variety and the low dialect.

A second reason, I think, is based on the fact that the oldest detailed accounts of Classical Arabic are undeniably older, by a range of some 1,000 years, than any detailed accounts of the dialects. Coupled with this, to anticipate the third point, is the assumed greater complexity of the Classical language relative to the dialects (see e.g. Ferguson 1959a).<sup>3</sup> Linking these two perspectives, it is a relatively easy step to interpret the modern dialects as the simplified or even bastardized offspring of an older, more perfect Classical variety (Mahdī, 1984: 37).<sup>4</sup>

A third reason, related to the second, I believe is simply one of convenience. The Classical language offers a ready-made starting point for the summary of the history of Arabic. Fück's prestigious *Arabiya* offers a history of Arabic (subtitle, *Untersuchungen zur arabischen Sprach- und Stilgeschichte* [my emphasis]) which starts with the literary language and makes little serious attempt to incorporate dialect material (however defined, see Spitaler's review of 1953).

Taking these three perspectives in order critically and beginning with the first, while comparing the dialects with the Classical language on an equal footing would be relatively uncontroversial among most (perhaps not all) linguists, the comparison is likely to be misunderstood by many for cultural reasons, where it may well be assumed that a declaration of linguist equivalence (as it were) is tantamount to a statement of cultural and political equality between the dialects and the classical language. Logically, however, linguistic reconstruction is independent of cultural and political considerations.

Turning to the second point, it is clear that the relative time of diachronic reconstruction is what comparativists work with, rather than the absolute time of the Gregorian calendar. In terms of absolute time the earliest, extensive

<sup>3</sup> Sections 7 and 9 of Ferguson's classic article on diglossia, where he seeks to prove the greater grammatical and phonological complexity of the high as opposed to the low varieties is surely the weakest part of his characterization of diglossia. In Arabic there can be found instances where modern dialects have equally or more complex structures than the classical language.

<sup>4</sup> Mahdī admonishes us to study the dialects in order that the negative influences (sicknesses, *amrād*) of the dialect on the standard language (*fushā*) be eradicated. That is, one studies the dialects not to shed light on the Arabic language as a whole, but, rather to purify the standard. Where Chejne's (1969) 'The Arabic language' mentions the dialects it is often in a derogatory context (e.g., p. 84), though the discussion of language policy in the final chapters is somewhat balanced.

sources of Classical Arabic date from the seventh or eighth centuries.<sup>5</sup> These are far younger than the earliest sources for Akkadian, dating from about 2,500 B.C. No Semiticist, however, would argue that Akkadian therefore must be assumed to represent the earliest state of the Semitic languages. What is criterial is the relative time scale that emerges from the application of the comparative method, which shows, *inter alia*, that the younger (in absolute terms) Arabic language contains an older inventory of phonological elements (e.g. a complete set of differentiated emphatic correspondences, Moscati *et al.*, 1980: 24) than does the older Akkadian. Relative to the ur-Semitic phonological inventory one can say that Arabic is 'older' (in the sense that it has preserved older traits) than Akkadian. An analogous argument applies in principle to any comparison between the modern dialects and the classical language: *a priori* (i.e. prior to the application of the comparative method and/or internal reconstruction) one does not know whether a given trait in a dialect is 'older' (in relative terms), 'younger' or 'equivalent' to a comparable trait in the classical language.

Finally, considering the third point, convenience is no substitute for consistent application of a well-tested methodology. Just why few serious attempts have been made to reconstruct proto-Arabic is a question for the historian of Arabic and Semitic studies.<sup>6</sup> One reason, I suspect, is the (understandable) preference among philologists for the written word (Classical Arabic) over the spoken (dialects). What is not written is not fully legitimate. Linguistically-orientated comparative studies of Arabic, and more generally oriental and Islamic studies, for the first half of this century have tended to be dominated by philologists.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, since *c.* 1960, there has been a remarkable growth of interest in modern dialectal and sociolinguistic aspects of Arabic (see e.g. part 2, 1987 of the journal *Al-'Arabiyya*). These, however, have been largely restricted to descriptive and so-called theoretical linguistics, to the exclusion of comparative perspectives.

With these preliminary points in mind, it is time to turn to a summary of the concepts which have been used to characterize Arabic in diachronic terms.

### 1.1. *Arabic, Old and New*

The most frequently used terms to differentiate the main varieties of Arabic are Old Arabic (OA) and Neo-Arabic (NA). The terminology is particularly widespread in German scholarship (Altarabisch vs. Neuarabisch). The values

<sup>5</sup> I would leave open the question of whether one should place the earliest attestations of Classical Arabic in the seventh or eighth century. One potential source, the eighth-century papyri, is probably too fragmentary for use to reconstruct a complete grammar, while a second, the Quran, besides being stylistically unique, is associated with a range of problems (absolute dating of oldest extant text, the variant readings) which renders its inclusion in the present study impractical. Barring full-scale studies of these sources, I believe it legitimate for two reasons, when referring to Classical Arabic, to concentrate on the variety described by Sibawaih. First, Sibawaih is unequivocally datable to the second half of the eighth century, and secondly, the variety he describes easily surpasses in detail any other early sources, effectively establishing a standard by which other varieties, both earlier and later, are measurable. None the less, given the open questions related to pre-Sibawaihan Arabic, I will continue to refer to Classical Arabic (or, as defined in Part II, section 5, Old Arabic) as the variety attested in the seventh and eighth centuries.

<sup>6</sup> One of the few explicit attempts is Cowan (1960). As this concentrates exclusively on phonology it is not directly relevant to the present study.

<sup>7</sup> I think this prejudice is betrayed, for instance, in Brockelmann's (1982 [1908]: 6) contention that Akkadian is the oldest independent Semitic language. It is undeniably the oldest one attested in writing. There is, however, no way of proving that it is older than proto-Arabic or proto-Ethiopic (as opposed to an undifferentiated proto-West Semitic such as Brockelmann assumes). On comparative grounds, Diakonoff (1988: 24) assumes a dialectal differentiation of Semitic as early as 4,000–5,000 B.C., which would give adequate time for a differentiated ancestor of Arabic to have arisen, parallel to Akkadian.

which these terms take vary from scholar to scholar and context to context. Old Arabic, for instance, may designate the old pre-Islamic languages/dialects of the Arabian peninsula known through epigraphic inscriptions (Müller, 1982). More commonly, Old Arabic designates a variety attested in old texts and opposed to Neo-Arabic, which minimally includes the modern dialects. This opposition, however, is developed in different ways. Brockelmann (1982 [1908]) appears to restrict Neuarabisch to actually attested contemporary dialects. On the other hand, his Altarabisch encompasses three distinct sub-varieties, the classical language of poetry, quranic Arabic, and the old Arabic dialects (1982: 23). 'Alt' and 'neu' for Brockelmann are thus largely objects datable by absolute time. Given his suspicion of proto-Semitic as a concrete entity (1982: 4), it is not surprising that Brockelmann made no attempt to link the two varieties in a single systematic entity.

For Blau (1981, 1988), Old and Neo-Arabic are given a more concrete linguistic characterization, designating linguistic types.<sup>8</sup> Blau suggests a number of contrasts between the two, the most important probably being the presence of case in Old Arabic and its lack in Neo-Arabic (see also Fück, 1950: 2; see sections 2, 4). On the basis of the linguistic differences, Blau takes an important methodological step in reading an historical dimension into the typological differences. Elements of the neo-Arabic type can be discerned in various types of early writing, dating from as early as the eighth century. On the basis of these older texts Blau develops a three-fold model for the development of Arabic, Old Arabic, more or less coterminous with the Classical language, Middle Arabic, the language of the older texts which deviates from Old Arabic, and Neo-Arabic, the final phase in the development where, as it were, the mixed nature of Middle Arabic (some old elements, some new) gives way fully to the situation found in today's dialects. Middle and Neo-Arabic developed linearly out of Old Arabic because of the loss of classical elements under the pressure of the rapid expansion and urbanization of Arab culture in the Islamic period (Fück, 1950: 5 ff.).

Both Brockelmann and Blau anchor their models in Old Arabic, a variety whose features are fixed and stable and which provides the starting point for the development of their analysis of Arabic. A very different approach is taken by Corriente (1976).<sup>9</sup> For him Classical Arabic is itself the endpoint of a development within the complex of varieties of Old Arabic is itself the endpoint of a development within the complex of varieties of Old Arabic (also Rabin, 1955). Its crystallization in the late eighth century was determined '... by native grammarians whose main concern was to set up a standardized, socio-linguistically biased type of Arabic for formal register purposes, i.e. *Al-'Arabiyya*' (1976: 62). Although one can take issue with the mechanistic role of the grammarians in this characterization (see 3.2)—their work after all reflected trends in the society as a whole—this summary does I believe correctly describe one of the important effects of the grammarians' work. Corriente adduces many examples supporting the contention that Classical Arabic, the *fushā*, is itself the result of a filtering process whereby variation is classified, pared and brought within manageable bounds. If Classical Arabic is a well-defined variety, it has its origins in varieties which are not. Since my own

<sup>8</sup> Blau's concept of Old and Neo-Arabic is taken over more or less intact by Fischer (1982: 83 ff.), see Part II, 4.2.

<sup>9</sup> A diachronic, yet neutral usage of the term Old Arabic can be noted where Blanc (1964: 183, n.8) uses the term to refer to the putative ancestor of the modern dialects. With Blanc the term is, so to speak, an article of faith, as he does not attempt to give it any linguistic content.

position expands on Corriente's, I will leave documentation of Corriente till section 3.1, where Classical Arabic is treated in greater detail.

As a corollary to Corriente's ideas, I would add that it is no contradiction to see the modern dialects as developing out of the same material as did the classical language.

### 1.2. *Related ideas*

A number of scholars have contributed to the discussion of the relationship between Old and Neo-Arabic without referring specifically to it in such terms. Ferguson's (1959b) contribution in fact antedates the work of Blau and Corriente, and may well have served as a methodological model for Blau's work in particular. Ferguson, like Blau, taking Classical Arabic as an anchor, argued that the modern dialects formed a homogeneous contrast to the Classical language. The modern dialects were said to have arisen in the form of a koine that took shape in the military camps of the original Arab conquerors in the period of Islamic expansion. This elegantly simple idea ran into problems as more work was done on Arabic dialects, and it became clear that the dialects themselves differ probably as much amongst each other as they do from the Classical language (see e.g. Kaye, 1976 and Part II, section 4 of this paper).<sup>10</sup>

A work which took a philological perspective a diachronic step deeper is Diem's (1973) study of case endings in the Arabic words found in the Aramaic inscriptions of the Arabs of Nabataea in southern Jordan, dating from about 100 B.C.<sup>11</sup> Diem shows that Arabic personal names found in the inscriptions did not show traces of a living case system. If Diem's interpretation of the data is correct, and Blau himself does not explicitly refute it (1988: 11 ff.), it would mean that the *oldest* written evidence of Arabic is characterized by a linguistic trait, the lack of case endings, which is otherwise said to be a characteristic *par excellence* of Neo-Arabic (see 2.2).

I will make reference to these two perspectives in the following, Ferguson implicitly for the methodology in section 4 and Diem for the purported antiquity of Arabic case inflection.

### 1.3. *An impasse*

Summing up this section, by and large there are two opposed conceptualizations of the status of Old and Neo-Arabic. The one sees the classical language as either identical with Old Arabic, or closely related to it—for example, one of its representatives. Neo-Arabic developed out of Old Arabic via a process of simplification (see 4.2). A second sees the classical language as itself the product of evolutionary forces within Old Arabic, and developing further in ways I will specify in sections 3–5.

An obvious problem with the first perspective is the undeniable fact that Classical Arabic in its most detailed single account, that of Sibawaih, was characterized by a good deal of internal variation (see section 3). I hesitate to speak of Old Arabic dialects here (*pace* Rabin, 1951), as this prejudices and pre-categorizes the many attested variant forms in ways not necessarily intended by Sibawaih and other early grammarians (e.g. Farra').<sup>12</sup> In any case, Blau

<sup>10</sup> A more recent work which uses the classical language as the first anchor is Versteegh's (1984) attempt to derive the modern dialects from the classical language, via a pidginization stage (see Owens, 1989, for criticisms). A number of writers who examine the linguistic history of Arabic assume positions which I criticize here. Garbell (1958), for example, follows Fück in using Classical Arabic as the initial anchor in Arabic diachrony.

<sup>11</sup> The Nabataean Arabs used Aramaic as their literary variety.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to gainsay the invaluable work of Kofler (1940), Rabin (1951) and others. None the less, I know of no critical studies which link the many attested linguistic variants noted by the Arabic grammarians to the conceptual terminology by which these same grammarians understood these forms. A variant form in Sibawaih most likely has a different status from a

tends to assume that there was a single *'Arabiyya* which was largely coterminous with the language of the Bedouins. It is not completely clear how Blau would integrate this internal variation into his developmental model. Fischer (1995) provides a more explicit model than Blau. He draws a contrast between Old Arabic, by which Classical Arabic is understood, and Old Arabic dialects. The modern dialects are the offspring of Old Arabic dialects, not of Classical Arabic. The difficulty with this formulation is that it fails to explain the overwhelming similarities which are found between Classical Arabic and the modern dialects (and by implication, between Classical Arabic and the Old Arabic dialects). Deriving the modern dialects from the Classical language, *pace* Blau, avoids the anomaly produced in Fischer's model (see 4.2).

Probably the most prominent difference between Old Arabic, however defined in the past literature, and modern dialects, the one at the head of the differentiating list (Fück, 1950: 2; Blau, 1988: 2; Fischer, 1982: 83), is the case and mode inflectional system. It is thus time to turn to a detailed consideration of this phenomenon in the debate about the relationship between Old Arabic, proto-Arabic and the modern dialects. I will concentrate exclusively on the central feature of Arabic case marking, short-vowel nominal inflection.

## 2. Case in the Afroasiatic phylum

The phyllic unity of Afroasiatic rests on striking correspondences found in all branches of the phylum within the verbal and pronominal systems. Personal markers (in pronouns and/or verbs), for instance, in *-k* 'second person' (sg. and pl.), *-nV* 'lp.' (*m* in Chadic), *s* ~ *š* 'third person', a second and third person plural formed from the consonantal person marker *+u* + (nasal) (nasal lacking in Chadic) are found in all branches. Verb conjugations differentiated according to prefixing and suffixing classes (in various distributions) are found in three of the branches, Semitic, Cushitic and Berber, while the other two, Egyptian (suffix only) and Chadic (prefix only) have conjugations with clear correspondences to one or the other (see e.g. Rössler, 1950; Voigt, 1987; Diakonoff, 1988). It is therefore equally striking that only two of the five<sup>13</sup> branches, Semitic and Cushitic, have languages with morphological case systems. Even within these two branches there is a good deal of variation among individual languages, and the question of the extent to which Cushitic case corresponds to Semitic is far from clear. In 2.1 I briefly summarize the situation for Cushitic, and in 2.2 that for Semitic.

### 2.1. Case in Cushitic

While many of the Cushitic languages have case systems, it is by no means clear that they derive from a proto-Cushitic case system. Such a proposal has

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variant form in Suyuṭi, who lived 700 years after Sibawaih, and both of these, in turn, may differ from the modern concept of 'dialect'.

<sup>13</sup> I assume a very traditional Afroasiatic family tree, well aware that there are classificatory questions at all levels. I don't think, at this point, that such questions bear crucially on the present treatment of case, however.

Berber and Chadic do not have case. Since Egyptian orthography did not mark short vowels, whether or not ancient Egyptian had a case system is difficult to know. Even if Callender's (1975) attempt to reconstruct ancient Egyptian cases on the basis of the functional behaviour of verbal forms is on the right track, his attribution of formal values to them (e.g. nominative *-u*, accusative *-a*) is speculative at best, at worst, no more than the filling in of an Egyptian consonantal text with short vocalic values taken over from Classical Arabic. Petráček (1988: 40) does not reconstruct a case system for ancient Egyptian.

been put forward by Sasse (1984) where a proto-Cushitic case system with nominative opposed to accusative is postulated.<sup>14</sup>

Against this Tosco (1993, in the spirit of Castellino, 1978: 40) has argued that the origin of many Cushitic nominative markers lies in a focus morpheme. Tosco's argumentation is based on both universal and formal considerations, the main features of which are as follows.

First he notes (as have a number of scholars before him) that the nominative-absolutive (roughly = accusative) distinction in Cushitic is typologically odd since it is the nominative which is the marked form by a number of criteria. It is the nominative noun, for example, which is morphologically marked (see (1) vs. (2)),<sup>15</sup> e.g., Oromo

- (1) *namičč-i ní-dufe*  
man-nom. pre v.-came  
'The man came'.  
(2) *namiččá arke*  
man(abs.) saw  
'He saw the man'.

The unmarked absolutive serves as the basis for further inflections, cf. genitive (*ka*) *namičč-áa* 'of the man'. Furthermore, the nominative has a more restricted distribution, limited only to the subject, and is far less frequent in texts. In these points the Cushitic nominative has close affinities to grammaticalized topics.

Reviewing the literature on Cushitic languages, Tosco shows further that a suffix *-i* throughout the branch, for example, Highland East Cushitic (e.g. Sidamo *mín-i* 'house-*i*'), Central Cushitic (Awngi *-ki*), is found which marks not only subjects but other topicalized constituents as well. Where *-i* has been grammaticalized as a subject marker other markers develop as topicalizers. An *-n* is particularly common in this function, as perhaps exhibited in the Harar Oromo.

- (3) *namiččá-n arke*  
man-topic saw  
'I saw the *man*'.

Relating the Cushitic data to Semitic, it is furthermore noteworthy that Sasse's reconstruction, nominative *\*-i/-u*, absolutive *\*-a* does not self-evidently correspond to the three-valued Semitic system. In fact, as Tosco shows, the only widespread nominative-like (Tosco's topicalizer) inflection on full nouns is *-i*.<sup>16</sup> It is true that a 'nominative' *u* is found throughout Cushitic, though as part of the article or demonstrative, not as a nominal affix (e.g., Oromo

<sup>14</sup> Sasse leaves open the possibility that other cases might be reconstructible. Diakonoff (1988: 60) proposes an 'abstract' proto-Afroasiatic case system, characterized above all, apparently, by its abstractness. Formally there was an opposition between *i~u* vs. *-a~∅*, though how this system worked functionally at the proto-Afroasiatic stage is not spelt out in detail. Diakonoff's reconstruction rests largely on data from Semitic and Cushitic and hence is open to all the criticisms of postulating a proto-Cushitic case system contained in this section. Furthermore, his entire reconstruction of Afroasiatic case is based on the dubious assumption that the proto language was an ergative one. His claim (1988: 59) that Oromo (and similarly, I suspect, his claims for Beja, Sidamo and Ometo) is an ergative language (or has traces of an ergative system?) is mysterious (see Owens, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Greenberg (1978: 95, universal 38) notes that if there is a case system the subject of the intransitive verb will be marked by the least marked case (also Croft, 1990: 104).

<sup>16</sup> In a number of Highland East Cushitic languages (Hudson, 1976: 253 ff.) the nominative (or topic) form is phonologically determined relative to the absolute form: if the absolute ends in a front vowel or *-a* it is *-i*, if in *-o* it is *-u*.

*kuni* ‘this-nom.’, vs. *kana* ‘this-abs.’).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Cushitic case marking is, unlike Semitic, overwhelmingly phrase final (Central Cushitic Awngi [Hetzron, 1976a: 37] and Oromo are exceptional). In Somali, for instance, where the nominative subject is generally shown by lowering a tone from H to L, one has in absolutive case, *nín* ‘man’ → nom *nin*, but nom. *nin-ku* ‘the man’, where the determiner assumes the low tone, allowing *nín* to re-assume its unmarked absolutive form with high tone (Saeed, 1987: 133). Any attempt to link this Cushitic data to Semitic case would have to account for significant structural mismatches. To these problems can be added that of the Cushitic genitive, which neither Sasse nor Tosco integrates into his model, both being cognizant of the special problems accompanying the task.

To summarize this section, while it is certainly correct, paraphrasing and changing Sasse’s formulation slightly, to speak of certain Cushitic endings as bearing ‘a striking resemblance to certain formatives ... in other Afroasiatic branches’ (1984: 111), it does not appear possible, at this point at least, to link these directly to Semitic case markers. Even assuming a link to be possible, it would not automatically follow that it would be made in terms of case. Indeed, given that it is only the Semitic branch (following Tosco for Cushitic) which unequivocally has a proto-case system, it would not be surprising if such a system developed at the proto-stage of Semitic out of markers of another type.

## 2.2. Semitic case

It is not my purpose here to review the literature on case in Semitic. The situation in Arabic will be reviewed in detail in any case in the next two sections. For present purposes two basic points need to be made.

First, although a three-valued case system (nominative *-u*, accusative *-a*, genitive *-i*) has to be reconstructed for proto-Semitic, only a minority of the well-attested Semitic languages have it. Moreover assuming Moscati *et al.*’s tri-partite classification of Semitic into North-east, North-west and South-west sub-branches, caseless languages (or dialects) are attested in each sub-branch. The earlier stages of Akkadian (North-east) had it, though after 1,000 B.C. the case system showed clear signs of breaking down.<sup>18</sup> Most of the North-west Semitic languages did not have case (Hebrew, Aramaic, Phoenician), only Ugaritic<sup>19</sup> and Eblaitic (probably) possessing it. The situation with Ugaritic in

<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically, the Semitic article/demonstrative system is neither particularly unified, nor do most of the Semitic languages (including Classical Arabic and most stages of Akkadian, Von Soden, 1969: 47) show case differentiation in it (Moscati *et al.*, 1980: 110).

<sup>18</sup> The outside observer may be slightly disquieted by Von Soden’s comment (1969: 80) that even in Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian exceptions to the expected case-marking system occur. He attributes these to orthographic errors or to ‘bad pronunciation’ (?). A closer study of such ‘errors’ would be interesting.

<sup>19</sup> Even Semiticists are not united on which Semitic languages demonstrably have case systems. Rabin (1969: 161), for example, cautions that there is not enough data to reconstruct case syntax in Ugaritic and hence does not include Ugaritic among the attested case-bearing Semitic languages. He has a two-valued case system for Gə’əz (as opposed to Wenginger’s 1993 one), but would apparently rather identify the Gə’əz Ø ‘nominative’ etymologically with the Akkadian absolutive (i.e. lack of morphological case) than with Classical Arabic *-u* (1969: 196). Some modern Ethiopian Semitic languages (e.g., Amharic *-n*) have secondarily developed an object case, sometimes sensitive to definiteness features. Barth’s (1898: 594) assumption that proto-Hebrew had case is based crucially on the *assumption* that proto-Semitic had case and only case (i.e. no parallel caseless variety, see section 5). Reading between the lines of his article, however, it is clear that one could no more justify the reconstruction of a case system from internal Biblical Hebrew sources than one can an Arabic case system from the modern Arabic dialects.

There are no attempts to my knowledge to explain how the assumed proto-Semitic case system disappeared so completely throughout the family. Moscati (1958), for example, is not so much an attempt to justify the assumption of a family-wide proto-case system as to determine the length of the assumed endings. Given the significant counter-evidence that some Semitic languages/varieties never had a case system, it may minimally be expected that the assumed ‘disappearance’ of case from these varieties be given a unified explanation.

this respect is not very satisfying, as the only direct evidence for case endings comes from the word-final symbol for the glottal stop. In Gordon's (1965) lexicon, these amount to barely ten noun lexemes from which the entire case system must be constructed. It is noteworthy that neither Rabin (1969, see n. 19) nor Petráček (1988: 39) list Ugaritic among the case-bearing Semitic languages. Among the South-west Semitic languages Classical Arabic has it, though *Gə'əz* (in absolute terms some 350–500 years older) probably did not, at least not in a way which self-evidently corresponds with the three-valued proto-Semitic system (see n. 19). The modern Ethiopic Semitic languages do not have it (see n. 19), nor do the modern Arabic dialects. The modern South Arabian languages do not have it, while the situation for epigraphic South Arabic is unclear due to the script.

From a distributional perspective one can approach the problem in two ways. First, it can be assumed that the cases are original and lost in those varieties where not attested. This, of course, is the approach taken by most Semiticists (e.g. Moscati *et al.*, 1980: 94) and could be said to be supported indirectly at least by the situation in Akkadian where the breakdown of a case system is diachronically attested. A second approach would be to view the caseless situation as original, the Akkadian and Classical Arabic system as innovative. This is problematic in view of the fact that Akkadian is the oldest of the languages in absolute terms and that the case system in the two languages is in general terms comparable. It is unlikely that the two innovated in the same way independently of each other, and if they did not, a common origin pushes the case system back into the proto stage. A third solution is that the proto-language had two systems (two dialects as it were), one with case, one without. I will be developing this perspective in the rest of this paper. For the moment it suffices to note that postulating a caseless variety at the proto-Semitic stage is supported by family-internal distributional facts, namely the broad range of Semitic languages which do not have case systems (to turn the argument introduced in the previous point on its head), and the arguments of the preceding section, where it was seen that Semitic case, within Afroasiatic, is probably innovative.

Secondly, it can be noted that in the Semitic languages with a case system there are contexts where, in synchronic terms, the system is neutralized. In the Akkadian genitive relation, the possessed noun does not bear case (or appears in the so-called absolute form) before a nominal possessor, and before a pronominal possessor generally only when the possessed noun ends in a vowel (Von Soden, 1969: 82 ff., 189 ff.).

- (3) *bēl-Ø*    *bīt-i-m*    *aššas-su*  
 master-Ø house-gen.-m. wife-his  
 'master (Ø = "absolute" case) of the house'

In Classical Arabic the neutralization, at least in traditional accounts (see 3.2.3), occurs in pausal position. Besides raising questions of the functional centrality of case in Semitic (see 3.1 below), the presence of these 'caseless' contexts suggests that even those Semitic languages with morphological case systems possessed traces of the caseless variety. I will touch on further case-related comparative aspects of Semitic later (3.3, 4.2, 5).

Brief though the remarks in the present section are, they are consistent enough to underscore Petráček's conclusion (1988: 41, see also Rabin, 1969: 191), based on comparative Afroasiatic data, that 'Die prägnant gebildete Struktur des Kasussystems im Semitischen (-u, -i, -a) dürfen wir als eine semitische Innovation ansehen.' If this point is accepted, however, there emerges

a further Semitic-internal issue, namely at what point Semitic itself developed a case system and whether this development represented the ancestor of all Semitic languages or only some of them. In the rest of this paper I will attempt to show that a detailed consideration of the issue for proto-Arabic will provide one important component in answering the question.

### 3. *Classical Arabic*

It should by now be becoming evident that the assumption that there is a clear distinction between those Semitic languages with case systems and those without, the latter possessing, in this respect, an older trait than the former, is perhaps not so problematic as is represented in the textbooks (e.g. Moscati *et al.*, 1980; Fischer, 1982a). In part 3 I examine the status of case in Classical Arabic in greater detail, using two sources. In 3.1 I summarize the work of Corriente, which is not adequately integrated into the debate about Old Arabic, perhaps because his views about case (and other matters) in Old Arabic are somewhat iconoclastic. In 3.2 I turn to the grammarian who, if not the 'founder' of Classical Arabic, doubtlessly played a more pivotal role in explicitly defining its form than any other individual, namely the eighth-century grammarian Sibawaih, in order to gain a more precise insight into the nature of the Classical Arabic which he defined. This account will initiate the comparison between the classical language and the modern dialects, a necessary step in the discussion of Blau's theory deriving the modern dialects from the classical language.

#### 3.1. *Corriente*

In a series of articles (1971, 1973, 1975, 1976) Corriente argued that Classical Arabic stood at the end of a development and that its crystallization in a more or less fixed form was due in large part to the efforts of the Arabic grammarians. Many of the points he makes relate to the case system. These include evidence of two main sorts: linguistic internal interpretations and an examination of the philological record.

The first perspective is prominent in his 1971 article where he showed that the functional yield of Classical Arabic cases—roughly those contexts where a difference of meaning can be affected by a change of case alone—is extremely low. While one may agree with Blau (1988: 268) that case systems generally have a high degree of redundancy, the fact remains that Arabic case is functionally not deeply integrated into the grammar. The case forms, furthermore, are not well integrated into the morphology (1971: 47). They are marked by a lack of allomorphy, being without exception tacked on to the end of the word, with little morpho-phonological interaction with either the stems to which they are suffixed or the items which may be suffixed to them. To this can be added the fact that, unlike in many languages, they are not subject to variational rules based on animacy and/or definiteness.

In his 1975 article Corriente cites deviations from the classical norms found in various verses of the *Kitāb al-Aghani*, including an inflectionally invariable dual (1975: 52; cf. Rabin, 1951: 173, and also of course Q. 20: 63), the mixing up of cases (1975: 57), or their complete absence (1975: 60). Corriente's explanation for these phenomena, and for the development of Middle Arabic out of Old Arabic, was to postulate a caseless form of Arabic formed in pre-Islamic times along the NW Arabic borderland in Nabataea (1976: 88; expanding on Diem, 1973, see 1.2 above). Associated with commercial centres, this variety of Arabic would have quickly acquired prestige status and in the aftermath of the early Islamic Arabic diaspora served as a model for the development of

caseless Middle Arabic in urban contexts. Note that he does not break with Blau completely, in that he sees the caseless varieties arising out of the border contacts.

The present study agrees with Corriente on the need to recognize a caseless form of Arabic existing contemporaneously with case varieties. Where issue can be taken with his account is the readiness to postulate a simple link between one variety of Old Arabic (Nabataean Arabic) and the modern dialects. The difficulties in drawing such a simple linkage will become evident in the discussion in part II, sections 4 and 5. As a general introductory remark, however, it may be noted that integrating the modern dialects into the reconstruction of proto-Arabic will yield results which do not self-evidently replicate the linguistic entities defined by the Arabic grammarians or by the epigraphic record (e.g. caseless Nabataean Arabic). This follows from the different methods and goals of the comparative approach and that of the Arabic grammarians, to whom I turn presently, as well as from the very fragmentary nature of the epigraphic record. A full reconstruction of proto-Arabic requires an independent and detailed definition of each of these components before they are put together into a larger picture.

### 3.2. *Sibawaih*

Without a full-scale study of all the material to be found in all grammatical treatises, the reasons for concentrating on Sibawaih in the first instance are self-evident. His *Kitāb* is, even by modern standards, a paragon of detail and completeness (if not necessarily of organization and clarity). More importantly, it is arguably the only work where a large body of directly observed linguistic usage has been systematically recorded. This is not to deny that interesting material is to be found in the later treatises. None the less, later grammarians were dependent to a large degree on Sibawaih for the simple reason that the 'Arabiyya came to consist of a more or less closed set of data by the tenth century,<sup>20</sup> rendering observations on the contemporary spoken language superfluous (see below). Nor does it mean that sources other than the grammatical treatises should not be invoked. However, as Corriente (1975: 43) points out, non-classicisms tend to be edited out of even less formal poetic corpora (see n. 5 for other sources).

There are two aspects of Sibawaih's work which may be kept in mind when interpreting his observations on Arabic. The first is that Sibawaih was confronted by a mass of variant forms which he evaluated in his own inimitable style, to which I shall turn presently. By and large, in the later grammars, written after the end of the ninth century, the variant forms were either excluded altogether or, in the more detailed grammars (e.g., Ibn al-Sarraġ, Ibn Ya'ish), treated in addenda to the general rules. If the rare, new material was added, it was nearly always by reference to forms recorded from persons or tribes contemporaneous with Sibawaih or earlier.<sup>21</sup>

The second point relates to Sibawaih's attitude towards the linguistic data he described. Carter (1973: 146; see Ditters, 1990: 131 for criticisms) has contrasted Sibawaih's 'descriptivist' approach with the 'prescriptivism' of later grammarians. This contrast of styles, as noted in the preceding paragraph,

<sup>20</sup> The work of the lexicographers, for which there are relatively few critical modern studies, may have to be excepted here. Unlike grammar, lexicography deals with an open-ended system. Adding a word to the lexicon rarely changes the lexicon in the way that adding a rule to the grammar potentially changes the entire grammar. When the lexicon of the 'Arabiyya became a closed set is as yet an open question.

<sup>21</sup> In this respect the analogy with the history of Arabic linguistic thinking breaks down; there were conceptual breakthroughs after the tenth century, though in areas of thinking 'adjacent' to the core areas of morphophonology and syntax, such as pragmatics and semantics.

reflects a general reorientation in the definition of what sort of data are allowable in the definition of the 'Arabiyya. It is not clear, however, what is to be understood by descriptivism, on which Carter does not elaborate. Understanding Sibawaih on this point is important to understanding and defining his theoretical linguistic thinking, the nature of the raw linguistic data which his detailed observations make accessible, and the motivations for and mechanisms by which grammars generally are developed. Baalbaki (1990: 18) has made the important point that the grammarians, confronted by a mass of linguistic data, did not 'content themselves with a purely descriptive exposition of linguistic material, but attempted to present this material within a *coherent* system ...' (my emphasis). Sibawaih, he observes, was the key figure in this process. In the next three subsections I discuss aspects of this system, with special reference to case-related problems.

First, however, it is relevant to mention that the very terminology of case marking among the grammarians may bear on the question of the existence of case in Old Arabic. The two oldest grammatical works, one (Sibawaih's) definitely from the end of the eighth century, the other equally old or only slightly younger, utilized case form as a central formal criteria for organizing their exposition of syntactic structures. Grammars and case marking go hand in hand in the history of Arabic grammatical theory. Khalaf al-Aḥmar's *Muqaddima fī 'l-Nahw* is a short, practical grammar (see Owens, 1990, ch. ix), whereas Sibawaih's *Kitāb* is one of the most detailed grammars of Arabic ever written. Sibawaih, in particular, goes to considerable pains at the very beginning of his grammar (I, 2.1 ff., see Baalbaki, 1990) to distinguish lexically determined from syntactically determined short vowels functionally, the latter of course being the case markers. Sibawaih's terminology is as follows:

(4a) *Short vowel terminology in Sibawaih*

lexical	morpho-syntactic	phonetic value
<i>damma</i>	<i>raf</i> <sup>ʿ</sup>	<i>u</i>
<i>fatha</i>	<i>naṣb</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>kasra</i>	<i>jarr</i>	<i>i</i>

It appears that the 'discovery' of functionally differentiated vowels was preceded by a time when the same terminology was used undifferentiated for vowels of both types. Such a system is still in evidence in Farra's terminology (Owens, 1990: 159).

(4b) *Short vowel terminology in Farra'*

lexical	morpho-syntactic	phonetic value
<i>damma</i> ~ <i>raf</i> <sup>ʿ</sup>	<i>raf</i> <sup>ʿ</sup>	<i>u</i>
<i>fatha</i> ~ <i>naṣb</i>	<i>naṣb</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>kasra</i> ~ <i>khafd</i>	<i>khafd</i>	<i>i</i>

In Farra' the morpho-syntactic values also are used to describe the phonetic values of lexical vowels, so that the vowel in *umm* (I: 6) is described as *raf*<sup>ʿ</sup>.<sup>22</sup> This supposition finds support in Versteegh's study on early Arabic grammar.

<sup>22</sup> That Farra's terminology should be the 'older', though he lived a generation after Sibawaih (n.b. in absolute time), may be explained by Talmon's theory (e.g. 1990) that Farra' represented an older grammatical tradition than did Sibawaih. There may be other explanations, too, but this is not the place to consider Talmon's ideas in detail.

I would tend to accept Farra's explanation for the variant *-i* of *al-ḥamd-i li llāhi* (I: 3) among some Bedouins, namely that the nominative is assimilated to the following *-i* of *li-* within the compound-like unit that has arisen due to 'frequency of use'. None the less, the example illustrates (1) the convenience of not having a distinctive terminology for case vs. lexical vowels, and (2) the non-case functional value of final nominal vowels among at least some groups of speakers.

tical theory. He shows (1993b: 125) that the quranic exegete Muḥammad al-Kalbi (d. 763), who lived a generation before Sibawaih (d. 793), used the term *ḍamm* for an *u* vowel 'within a word', as an 'ending' (Versteegh does not specify what sort here) and for a nunated noun. *Naṣb* is used for a lexical vowel *a*, an ending and for nunation, and similarly for the other terms in the lists in (4).

Rather than consider the data in terms of their implications for an understanding of the development of Arabic linguistic theory, which has been the main focus of interest in such data to date, they may be interpreted in terms of the present question of the status of case endings in the history of the language. It would appear that Sibawaih made explicit two aspects of vocalic variation, one lexically the other morpho-syntactically determined, which existed in the language he described.

One may ask here whether the variation and imprecise distinction between lexical and morpho-syntactic vowels found in Farra' and other early linguists and commentators do not originate in the fact that there existed varieties of Arabic, studied by Farra', in which vocalic variation at the end of words did not represent case endings, i.e. caseless varieties of Arabic. In such circumstances a consistently differentiating terminology would, of course, have been unnecessary. Farra's 'imprecise' terminology would thus reflect not a less differentiated grammatical thinking than Sibawaih's, but rather its application to a different data base. This perspective is admittedly speculative, though the idea of relating early terminological problems to actual language forms should be pursued further.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2.1. *An example*

The following example will serve as an introduction both to Sibawaih's treatment of case in Classical Arabic and to the way in which he processed linguistic data. From ch. 24 on (I, 31 ff.), Sibawaih considers some fairly complex data in which he is concerned to define the case form of a topic and/or agent noun (see Khan, 1988: 25 ff. for discussion). A basic contrast is shown in (5a) vs. (5b).

(5a) *zayd-un laqī-tu akh-ā-hu* (I: 32.16)  
 Zayd-nom. met-I brother-acc.-his  
 'As for Zayd, I found his brother'.

(5b) *zayd-an laqī-tu akh-ā-hu* (I: 32.20)  
 zayd-acc.  
 'As for Zayd, I found his brother'.

'Zayd' can equally appear in nominative or accusative form here. Were Sibawaih a simple descriptivist he would presumably have been content to note that a topic can appear in nominative or accusative form, in free variation. Such a statement appears to account for most of the topicalization structures which Sibawaih discusses in this and the following chapters. Such an approach is quite foreign to his methodology, however. For Sibawaih no variation is simply 'free' because every variant which he catalogues implies its own conceptual interpretation. In the present example, both nominative and accusative cases are justified by a series of analogies with other, simpler structures and paraphrases, with examples which allow a regularization of apparently anomalous structural elements.

<sup>23</sup> One thinks, for example, of the meaning of the designations for linguistic varieties/entities, *kalām, luḡha, qawl* (Versteegh, 1993: 91, 99 ff.) in the development of the notion of an 'Arabiyya.

At the beginning of ch. 31 (I, 31.17 ff.) Sibawaih explains the following pairs of examples (where (6a) corresponds to (5a), (6b) to (5b)).

(6a) *zayd-un darab-tu-hu*  
Zayd-nom. hit-I-him  
'As for Zayd, I hit him'.

(6b) *zayd-an darab-tu-hu*  
zayd-acc.  
'Zayd, I hit him'

(6a) contains a nominative noun in the function of topic (*mubtada'*), with the verb structurally set against the topic as its comment<sup>24</sup> (*mabniyy 'alā 'l-mubtada'*, see Levin, 1985). Here the nominative in Zayd is explained by the general property that topics are nominatively marked. In (6b) the problem is to explain the accusative in Zayd, which Sibawaih does by assuming an implicit verb (*iḍmār al-fi'l*, I, 32.1) of the same value as the main verb which governs the accusative in Zayd (= (*darabtu*) *zaydan darabtuhu*).

Sibawaih then proceeds to more complex examples where the co-referential pronoun is detached from the verb, first where the direct object is marked by a preposition (*zayd-un/an marartu bihi* 'As for Zayd, I passed him'), then to the set in (5). (5a) is explained analogously to (6a), as a topic (nominative)+comment structure. That in (5b) is more problematic because in contrast to (6b) there does not appear to be a direct semantic link between the topicalized noun and the main verb. There is no obvious sense in which the action of 'hitting' can be directly related to the topic, Zayd. To explain these structures Sibawaih invokes a new principle, namely that 'if the action falls on the object containing a co-eferential pronoun it is as if the action falls on the object itself' (32.17). This semantic equivalence carries over to a morpho-syntactic one, where the topicalized noun assumes the same case form as the item it is linked with. In (5b), for instance, the co-referential pronoun *-hu* links *akhā-* to *zaydan*. Since *akhā-* is accusative, so, too, can *zayd* be.<sup>25</sup> This principle is invoked a number of times to explain ever more complex structures in the succeeding pages (particularly I, 42).

Examples such as these from Sibawaih are abundant. I will come back to them presently, for the moment noting only that what is important here is that an example cited by Sibawaih always has to be integrated into his linguistic thinking. Sibawaih cites (5a) with minimal comment because for Sibawaih its structure is clear. When he moves to (5b) he is confronted by a new structural state of affairs which requires new principles, new explanations. What happens, however, when he meets structures which he finds clearly wrong? In fact this happens relatively infrequently.<sup>26</sup> It is true, as Carter (1973) points out, that Sibawaih does have an evaluative vocabulary which allows him to rank the acceptability of one structure against another. When he uses it, however, it is usually to recommend a over b, without rejecting b altogether. In the present

<sup>24</sup> The term 'comment' is a more appropriate translation of the later '*khābar*'. Levin (1985: 302) translates Sibawaih's term as 'the part which makes the sentence complete'. For brevity's sake I use the shorter term 'comment'.

<sup>25</sup> Sibawaih may not be entirely convinced of this explanation himself, for he adds two further (somewhat strained) examples where a noun is grammatically affected by a verb, without bearing a direct semantic relation to the action represented in it. Thus one might say, 'I honoured him as you honoured his brother' (I, 32.17) where the honouring is equal in both actions, though in the first it is 'him' who is honoured, whereas in the second it is not 'him' but his brother.

<sup>26</sup> Admittedly 'infrequently' is an impressionistic evaluation. It can in principle be fairly strictly measured, however, taking all the examples completely disallowed by Sibawaih divided by all his examples discussed. The percentage would be quite low.

example, for instance, he says that the nominative (6a) is 'better' (I, 32.22). Clearly, however, he makes this judgement on the basis of the grammatical merits of each structure, i.e. in terms of the rules by which he evaluates them in the first place.

None the less, it is important for present purposes to know if Sibawaih sets limits to the acceptable. One positive answer to this question can be illustrated by his discussion of pausal forms, which will be referred to further in 3.2.3. Sibawaih (II, 309, ch. 495) notes that it may happen in -CC#-final nouns (particularly with sonorants as the final C apparently) that in pausal position the genitive or nominative case markers are not deleted but rather, by a process of what may be termed 'case epenthesis', form a final CVC syllable. Thus 'some Arabs', instead of saying *bakr(u)* or *bakr(i)*, have *bakur#* 'Bakr-nom.', *bakir#* 'Bakr-gen.'. He adds, however, that this is possible only so long as the resulting structure meets acceptable word structure constraints. '*idl*-equal', may undergo genitive case epenthesis, '*idil#*', but in the nominative this is impossible, \*'*idul*', because 'they [Bedouins] have no words of structure *fi'ul*' (309.20). Here the non-occurrence of particular forms is apparently confirmed not in terms of what Sibawaih observed or tested, but rather in terms of the violation of his own general rule.

What should by now be clear is that there is no pure 'data' to be found in Sibawaih. Everything he observes and writes about is filtered through his own grammatical thinking. One salutary effect of this is that it was this very systematization of linguistic facts which helped him to produce a work of extraordinary detail. In examples (5–6) discussed above, Sibawaih starts with basic N-V-obj. structures, moves to N V prep.-obj. structures, and finally to N V Obj.-possessor-pro. structures, with each step tackling a slightly more complex case. His description is partly carried along and expanded by the very logic of his grammatical thinking.

This is not to say, however, that Sibawaih had no regard for the linguistic facts provided to him from his various sources. I think examples like (5) and (6) can be understood in the following way. Sibawaih was presented with raw data, and this was that the topic noun varies freely between nominative and accusative case. He accepted both forms, but on terms of his own theoretical making. It was Sibawaih's achievement to integrate these 'facts' into a more or less coherent whole (the definitive interpretation of Sibawaih remains to be written), in this case through such concepts as 'topic', *mabniyy 'alā al-mubtada'*, co-referentiality, and so on.

At the same time one has to assume that there are many elements of 'Arabic' which were outside the scope of Sibawaih's cognizance. Some of these, of course, are due to the mundane fact that Sibawaih was mortal, the amount of observations he could make finite. Other elements, however, would have escaped Sibawaih's notice because they could not be fitted into his linguistic thinking (Baalbaki 1990: 22). This is a necessary corollary of the system-driven nature of his methodology. As seen above, Sibawaih on principle rules out forms like \*'*idul*'. It is therefore unlikely, if such forms did exist, that they would have been observed by him. Caseless forms of Arabic could similarly have been outside his purview.

### 3.2.2. *Stable cases, free variation*

While it is improper to speak of free variation of case within a Sibawaihian analytic framework, the fact remains that this effectively is what he documents in many instances. Looking beyond the topic construction, there are many examples of what amount to free variation in case form discussed in the *Kitāb*.

In fact, the discussion above around (5–6) is typical of Sibawaih's exposition, intimately concerned to define the proper case forms. Full proof of this is a task beyond the confines of the present exposition. What can be offered here is a brief overview of the type of case variation Sibawaih dealt with, based on a review of the first 100 pages of the *Kitāb*, just under a quarter of book I. In these 100 pages, roughly the following topics are dealt with (initial pages of topics are given): general concepts (p. 1), transitivity (p. 10), negative in *laysa* and *mā* (p. 18), left noun dislocation (*tanāzu'*, p. 28), extraposition (p. 31) arranged according to type of predicate and predicational type, extraposition in inalienable-like constructions (p. 64), governance of participles, verbal nouns and adjectives (p. 70), extension of function (*ittisā'*) and (*ishtighāl*, 90; Owens, 1990: 251 ff.). In the following I will excerpt a representative example, summarizing Sibawaih's comment on each example.

- (7a) *mā 'abdu llāhi akh-ā-ka ~ akh-ū-ka*  
 'Abdullahi is not your brother'. (21.20)

Usual = nominative, accusative = dialectal usage, *mā al-ḥijāzi*

- (7b) *ḍarab-tu wa ḍaraba-nī zayd-un ~ zayd-an*  
 hit-me and hit-me Zayd-nom. ~ acc.  
 'I hit (Zayd) and Zayd hit me'. (28.18)

Nominative is better because of proximity to second verb, which logically requires a nominative agent. Accusative also allowable.

- (7c) *a zayd-an ~ zayd-un anta dārib-u-hu*  
 Q Zayd-a you hit-nom. him  
 'As for Zayd, are you going to ~ have you hit him'? (45.30)

Accusative correlates with verb-like imperfect meaning of active participle, nominative with nominal-like perfective meaning. This example follows the much more detailed and complicated instances of extraposition with verbal predicates, as in (5,6).

- (7d) *'abd-a ~ 'abd-u ullāhi fa-drib-hu*  
 Abdallah-acc. ~ nom. so-hit-him  
 'Abdallah, so hit him'. (58.12)

Accusative is preferred, since marked modal sentences (imperatives, conditionals, questions) imply a verbal predicate (which governs the accusative). None the less, contexts can be found (as here) allowing nominative as well.

- (7e) *ḍariba 'abdu llāhi zahr-u-hu ~ zahr-a-hu*  
 hit Abdallah back-nom. ~ acc.-his  
 'Abdullah was hit on his back'. (68.9),

Nominative, as *badal* or *tawkīd*, accusative as nominal complement brought into direct governance of the verb, with implied preposition (*'alā zahrīhi*) like *dakhaltu 'l-bayt-a ~ fī 'l-bayt-i*.

- (7f) *'ajīb-tu min darbi zayd-in wa 'amr-in/an* (81.1)  
 surprised-I from hitting Zayd-gen. and Amr-gen. ~ acc.  
 'I was surprised by the beating of Zayd and Amr'. (81.1)

Genitive in Amr by agreement with Zayd, accusative by virtue of an understood verb (*ḍaraba*) *'amran*.

- (7g) *duriba bihi darb-un da'if-un ~ darb-an da'if-an*  
 hit by it hitting-nom. weak-nom. ~ hitting-acc.  
 'A weak blow was hit with it ~ It was hit a weak blow with'. (97.2)

In passives without an expressed 'underlying' direct object, the choice is free as to which of a range of further complements can be promoted to agent. In this case, either the verbal noun is promoted (nom.), or no complement is promoted (acc.).

As the brief expositions make clear, there is no single explanation for the observed variation. It may be due to dialect variation (7a), though more frequently (7b, d-g) it is embedded within the logic of Sibawaih's own grammatical formulations. In some instances Sibawaih ranks the alternatives by some measure of relative appropriateness, while in others both variants are of equal value. In one case it may be objected that the example is not an example of free variation at all, since in (7c) the use of accusative or nominative in *zayd* presumably correlates with a difference in meaning. While the point of this section does not stand or fall on such examples, it is relevant here to draw a distinction between what Sibawaih said and what one may read between the lines of his pronouncements. In particular, given his predilection for (and task of) systematizing the language, one may at certain points (though certainly not in general) question whether what is systematized is really a part of the Arabic spoken in the eighth century, as opposed to the language as idealized by Sibawaih and other grammarians, who probably were more ready than the population at large to concretize subtle distinctions among competing variants whose origin was not necessarily of a purely linguistic (as opposed to stylistic, sociolinguistic or dialectal) nature. In any case, taken as a whole, 'free variation' is an adequate characterization of the *product* of Sibawaih's observations in (5-7). This does not mean, of course, that the variation would be conceived of in such terms by Sibawaih himself. To the contrary, as the explanatory notes are intended to make clear, each variant for Sibawaih is associated with its own structural logic.

It does not appear that the variation in the case system points to an impending breakdown. Sibawaih is too specific about which forms are uniquely correct in many contexts and too specific about the implications of choosing one variant or another to lend such speculation any weight. Taken as a whole, however, the variation does point to a system with an inner dynamic and flexibility, that is, a variation which grew out of various historical developments. It could even have evolved out of a non-case system (see 3.2.3).

It may be noted here, that there is a clear structural tendency in the variation, namely that most case variation involves the accusative as one of the two alternatives. Expanding on this observation, it is fair to say that the accusative is the unmarked term relative to frequency of functional occurrence. The only positions which are unequivocally *not* accusative are objects of prepositions and possessors (= genitive), comments, topics when the comment is not a verb and agents in VS (verbal) sentences (= nominative). Otherwise (the various objects, *tamyīz*, *hāl*, even subjects after the *inna* class of complementizers) sentence constituents take accusative, or vary freely in accusative with another case form (as in examples above).

### 3.2.3. *Pausal and context forms*

Probably the greatest degree of variation (of any type) associated with a single functional position is that relating to pausal forms. Sibawaih devotes most of the 28 pages between II, 302-30 to its explicit description, and there are various references to it in other parts of his work. It is clear that for Sibawaih pausal

context is not simply a nominal stem minus the indefinite and case suffixes, but rather a position engendering phonological changes of various sorts.<sup>27</sup> The topic is potentially important, because it has been assumed by many scholars (Brockelmann, 1982 [1908]: 462; Birkeland, 1952: 9; Fleisch, 1974: 23; Blau, 1981: 3; Diem, 1991: 303) that the modern caseless dialects derive from the Classical Arabic pausal forms. Concentrating here on those chapters which explicate pausal (*waqf*) forms,<sup>28</sup> it emerges that much of what he describes for pausal phenomena is not immediately relatable to the modern dialects. The following typology, without answering definitively the question of the extent to which there is a direct link between pausal forms in Sibawaih and the modern dialects, at least defines where the problems lie. The typology consists of two main parameters. One relates to Sibawaih's description of a particular phenomenon as being a property of context or pausal position (or both), the other to the range of distribution of the phenomenon, both in Sibawaih and in the modern dialects. I will illustrate these points here by means of an informal scale, at whose initial point no obvious connection between the dialects and Sibawaih's description exists and at whose end point a fairly plausible relation may be postulated.

At one extreme there are many parts of Sibawaih's description which have no relevance to the present question because they have no obvious reflexes in the modern dialects. Perhaps the clearest example of this sort is the fate of the case vowels themselves. In pausal position they do not simply disappear. Rather, the pausal position at which they occur may take on four different values (ch. 494). It is unnecessary to go into details here, the important point being that since the case vowels do not occur in the modern dialects it is impossible to draw connections between Sibawaih's description and their reflexes in the modern dialects.

Moving up the scale, a second type pertains to word-final *ā*, apparently when written with the *alif maqṣūra*. Sibawaih notes (II, 314.8) that although most Arabs pronounce it in pause as *-ā*, the Qays change it to *y*, as in *ḥublā* → *ḥublay* 'pregnant'. Among modern dialects, Blanc (1964: 50) notes that a final feminine *-a* irregularly undergoes *imāla* in Jewish Baghdadi Arabic, *heblē* 'pregnant' being among the lexical items where this happens. The *-ā* → *ay/-ē* change is frequent neither for Sibawaih, nor in the modern dialects. While there may be a connection between the Qays pausal form and the Baghdadi example, definitive proof is highly unlikely.

A third instance has already been mentioned above, where Sibawaih notes that 'some Arabs' employ case epenthesis in pausal position, e.g. *bakru#* → *bakur#* 'Bakr'. This case is more interesting than the previous one in two directions. On the one hand, for the classical language, Sibawaih does not appear to place such severe restrictions on the Arabs who use the form. On the other, for the modern dialects, as will be seen in 4.2 (11), under certain interpretations it can be related to a fairly widespread contemporary phenomenon. Very briefly, many modern dialects have a rule inserting an epenthetic vowel before a sonorant (e.g. *-r*, *-l*) consonant. Interestingly, all of Sibawaih's examples, admittedly only seven in all, have a sonorant, *-r*, *-l* or *-m* as the final

<sup>27</sup> As with many of his concepts, Sibawaih does not define what he means by pause and context. The fact that he includes topics among the 'pausal' chapters (see n. 25) which are not obviously descriptions of pausal phenomenon, e.g. the Assad and Tamimi realization of *-shi* for *-ki* '2fsg object suffix' (ch. 504), means that a closer look at these concepts in Sibawaih would be appropriate.

<sup>28</sup> There are 14 chapters in the page range cited above (chs. 490–504, 507) which deal exclusively or extensively with pausal forms. There is probably nowhere to be found a more detailed description of pausal phenomena in Classical Arabic than in Sibawaih.

consonant. Uncharacteristically, if sonority is indeed a conditioning factor, Sibawaih does not state a phonological environment in respect of the final consonant, though he does explicitly note (II, 310.5) that the process does not occur when a semi-vowel occurs as  $C_2$  (e.g. *zayd*, 'awn). Even if the sonority condition plays a role in Sibawaih, a difference exists with the modern dialects where, as will be seen, the rule applies anywhere in a word, not only finally as in Sibawaih. Certainly the present example potentially represents a more general correspondence between the modern dialects and Sibawaih's treatment of pausal phenomena than the case discussed in the preceding paragraph. The correspondence is not complete, however, so there will always be a risk in drawing definitive conclusions.

In a fourth set of cases correspondences can be drawn between modern dialects and a variety of pausal alternatives, or even with context forms. Sibawaih, for example, (ch. 500) says that the pausal form of nominative and genitive nominals of the form *fāliy* may be *rāmi#*, *rāmī#* or *rām#* 'has thrown'.<sup>29</sup> The modern dialects have *rāmi* here, or perhaps *rāmī*—the choice between the short *-i* or long *-ī* being one of phonological theory—<sup>30</sup> but not the pausal *rām*. On the other hand, the definite context forms also have *-īy*, *al-rāmī*, so they could also have been a 'source' for the modern dialectal forms. In this case correspondences between some of Sibawaih's morphological alternatives and modern dialects are close to perfect, but still too ambiguous to decide on a definite correspondence. In this category can be cited instances where it is Sibawaih's context form which provides the clearest link to the modern dialects. Such a case is found among the Tamim (II, 314.14), who in the f. near demonstrative have *hādhih* in pause,<sup>31</sup> but *hādhi* in context. In modern dialects *hādhi(y)* 'this f.' is very common.

Sibawaih's fine-grained descriptions certainly deserve more detailed discussion than there is space for here. I think that the examples are representative of a general predicament, however; namely that in only rare cases can an unequivocal connection be drawn between Sibawaih's description of pausal forms generally, i.e. not only those relating to the treatment of the final case vowel, and comparable forms in modern dialects. Even when such connections exist, it is rarely so that they would explain anything but a part of modern dialectal forms. Similarly, one would like to know why often only certain Arabs ('some of them', the Qays, Tamim, etc.) have forms analogous to the modern dialectal ones. Until these problems have been given more serious attention, I think it over selective to argue that the modern dialects arose from pausal forms, when the main piece of evidence supporting this position in Sibawaih would appear to be that one only of four possible ways of pronouncing case vowels in pausal position is by deleting the vowel altogether (*jazm*, ch. 394).

Besides interpretive problems of the above kind, there is a more unequivocal argument against assuming that Classical Arabic pausal forms were the forerunners of the dialectal caseless forms. According to Sibawaih pausal forms should occur only before pause. He mentions at various points in his discussion that the peculiarities which he describes for them do not apply to forms in connected speech (*waṣl*, e.g. II, 302.8, 306.5, 313.18). Dealing as we are with

<sup>29</sup> Carter (1990) suggests that the last form is rare.

<sup>30</sup> The V-final suffixes in the dialects generally have two forms, long before a further suffix, otherwise short. Which, if either, variant is assumed to be basic is as much a matter of the linguistic theory one assumes as the historical linguistic perspective one adopts. See also Part II, section 4.2.

<sup>31</sup> Though later (II, 322.15), Sibawaih reports from a reliable source that some Arabs have *hādhih* as a context form.

written texts, there is no way to measure where precisely pauses were placed in the Classical language, at least not in non-poetic style, which certainly must be assumed to be the purported model of the modern dialect ancestor. To arrive at an idea of how frequent pauses actually are in spoken language I used a corpus of texts which I have collected over the last seven years from the spoken Arabic of NE Nigeria. The texts are transcribed with a basic phonetic alphabet and pauses are explicitly marked wherever they occur. Since this material is computerized it is an easy matter to calculate how many pauses there are in each text. Table 1 gives basic information from five texts about the number of pauses relative to the total number of words.<sup>32</sup>

TABLE 1.

<i>Text no.</i>	<i>Number of words</i>	<i>Number of pauses</i>	<i>word/pause ratio</i>
1	2460	598	4.11
2	6287	956	6.57
3	5329	1264	4.21
4	7152	1325	5.39
5	3455	689	5.01
Total			5.09

The ratio of 5:1 means that, on average, only one word in five occurs before a pause. Four words in five do not. Assuming this ratio to be generally representative of spoken Arabic—lacking further statistics, the present ones must do—it is clear that most words do not occur in pausal contexts, and by extrapolation, that in Classical Arabic the non-pausal forms in normal speech would have considerably outnumbered the pausal. To argue that the modern dialects grew out of the pausal forms of the Classical language is to say that forms which are a relatively small minority became the standard for the further development of the language. This, I think, is *a priori* unlikely. A popular refinement on the pausal origin hypothesis is problematic and speculative. This would have it (e.g. Blau, 1988: 9; Corriente, 1976: 84) that under the influence of foreign-language learners, even in the Classical language the pausal forms began to be used for the non-pausal. Strictly speaking the idea is unverifiable; Sibawaih gives no intimation of such a process, and there are no modern analogies, in Arabic at least, by which to be guided. In trying to reconstruct the presumed process, lack of motivation is a stumbling block. Judging by the complex morphology of modern Arabic dialects, it appears that non-Arabs learned complex Arabic morphology and phonology and made it into their native language, apparently with little problem. Why should they have had such a problem with the cases? Moreover, what was really dropped was short final vowels, among which were found the cases. Even in the unlikely situation that the cases were too difficult for non-Arabs to learn, conceptual difficulty can certainly not be invoked to explain the disappearance of, say the *-a* from *'ayna* 'where'.

The hypothesis which I am developing avoids these mental gymnastics, since it is (roughly, see Part II, section 5 for a more refined discussion) claimed that the dialects descend from a variety which never did have case endings.

Before moving on to the modern dialects, I would like to mention one well-known characterization of Sibawaih, which he treated *inter alia* among the pausal forms. This is the opposition between the high vowels *i*, *u* vs. the low vowel *-a*, in particular the relative stability of the latter against the former.

<sup>32</sup> All five texts are informal conversations recorded between Nigerian Arabs.

Thus the high vowels are deleted in open syllables in CaCi/uC-V forms, both nouns and verbs, e.g. *kabid-un* → *kabd-un* 'liver', *aḏud-un* → *addun* 'upper arm' (II, 317.17, 320.6), *alima* → *alma* 'he knew', *usira* → *uṣra* 'it was squeezed' (II, 277.22), vs. *jamal-un* (\**jamlun*). Similarly, as is well known, when indefinite, whereas the high vowel case markers, *-u* (nom.) and *-i* (gen.) are deleted in pause, the low vowel *-an* (acc.) is lengthened to *-ā*. It is precisely in this lack of symmetry that one might search for the origins of the Arabic case system (proceeding on the assumption that case in Semitic, where it exists, is innovative). This pausal alteration may represent an older state of affairs where an *-a(a)* suffix (as seen above, representing the unmarked case in Arabic) was opposed to a bare nominal stem (Ø). The nominative and genitive vowels may then have developed out of epenthetic vowels which were inserted in particular contexts.<sup>33</sup> One can cite the Gə'əz opposition *-a*-Ø (genitive-Ø), or even the Berber construct-independent (unmarked, *u*-Ø) state contrasts for analogous morpho-syntactic dualities in related languages.

Having developed the thesis that a caseless variety of Arabic is as old or older than one possessing case, on the basis of the comparative and philological record, it will be the main task of the second part of the paper to bring evidence to bear on the question from the modern dialects. This will lead to the development of a general model defining the genesis of case in Arabic.

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<sup>33</sup> This suggestion is speculative, and it should be emphasized is not crucial to the argument. Its overall plausibility may be heightened by the following (again speculative) considerations. Mauro Tosco (p.c.) points out that it is relatively unlikely for non-morphemic material to be reinterpreted with a morphemic value, as the present suggestion entails. To reply to this, there are situations where it is very common for non-morphemic material in one language to acquire morphemic value in another, namely via language contact. A standard example is Arabic *kitāb*, where non-morphemic *ki-* becomes in the Swahili loanword *ki-tabu* identified with the Swahili *ki-*noun class marker, hence pl. *vi-tabu*. The process is quite regular and is not restricted to this one class of nouns (see e.g. Krumm, 1940: 52 ff.). It cannot be ruled out (though proof is equally elusive) that a similar process did not occur, introducing case into Arabic. The oldest mention of the 'Arabs' is from an Akkadian text of 853 B.C. Actual contact between speakers of Akkadian and speakers of proto-Arabic very likely occurred. It could therefore also be that Akkadian speakers with a functional case system shifting into Arabic (or Arabic-Akkadian bilinguals) reinterpreted the original Arabic epenthetic vowels as case vowels. This process may have been helped if Arabic already had a suffix *-a* (perhaps adverbial, as in Hebrew). (See section 5 on co-existence of case and caseless varieties, and 4.2 (13) for parallels between the distribution of case suffixes and epenthetic vowels.)

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