

# Gender “Polarity”: Theoretical Aspects of Somali Nominal Morphology

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of polarity (Meinhof 1912) stands for a widely recognized principle said to be operative in the Afroasiatic languages, the core case being the polarity patterns of gender reversals in Cushitic. As is quite well-known, only internal plurals seem to keep the same gender as the base singular form in Somali: *dīn* (m) ‘tortoise’ / *dīin-á-n* (m) ‘tortoises’ (see section 3.2.2). Other plurals, whether prosodic plurals (*árday* ‘student’ (m) / *ardáy* ‘students’ (f)) or plurals derived by suffixation (*ínan* (m) ‘boy’ / *inam-(m)ó* (f) ‘boys,’ *gabádh* (f) ‘girl’ / *gabdh-ó* (m) ‘girls,’ *hooyó* (f) ‘mother’ / *hooyó-oyin* (m) ‘mothers,’ etc.), seem systematically “polaric.” However, both empirical (including historical) and theoretical considerations suggest that the concept of polarity, as a principle of grammar, is hardly plausible, and that a more articulate account is required.

In this paper, I explore the possibility of deriving the observed polarity effects from a more abstract property of nominal number in Somali, namely the fact that plural affixes are nominal categories which behave like other nominal affixes with a fixed inherent gender. The account will rest on a derivational view of plural formation, leading to an unified treatment of these forms which explains many of their syntactic and morphological peculiarities, such as the

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existence of double plural forms (also attested in Celtic), as well as inflected forms in composition and derivation, in which unmistakably derivational processes apply “outside of” an inflected plural noun.

From a theoretical point of view, the proposal has consequences for the proper treatment of inflectional vs. derivational processes. In particular, I will claim that the properties of Somali plurals are quite consistent with a purely syntactic approach to word formation (Halle and Marantz 1993 and related work) and can even be explained from this point of view. I expect this approach to be relevant to the analysis of the Semitic languages as well. Typically, inflectional processes operating in the morphological component – such as ‘template conditions’ for morphological structures, ablaut/umlaut alternations, or processes that explicitly insert infixes in the verbal system in Semitic – are common in Afroasiatic: on classical lexicalist treatments (e.g., Anderson 1992), the word reaches the phonological component uninflected, the phonetic form resulting from interaction with functional elements within the morpho-phonological component. Thus, this study may add crucial insight into the nature of these processes and the study of their formal properties.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the concept of polarity and its relevance to Afroasiatic nominal morphology. Section 3 addresses the problem of Somali plural formation by discussing Andrzejewski’s (1964) model of declensions and providing a revised classification. Sections 4 and 5 bring the Distributed Morphology approach into the picture and offer a unified analysis of Somali plurals, checking its predictions with respect to the range of morphological and phonological processes that may affect plural forms. In section 6, the consequences of this analysis for subject–verb agreement (partial agreement: gender and person only) are briefly explored, in relation to parallel facts in the Semitic and Celtic languages.

## 2. The concept of polarity

Introduced in Meinhof’s (1912) comparative study, the concept of polarity is still understood not only as a descriptive label for certain contrastive phenomena in the grammar of Afroasiatic languages, but as the principle behind them.<sup>1</sup> In Meinhof’s definition, given a system of two terms (grammatical features) and two exponents, values and exponents can be inverted so that

If under certain conditions A becomes B, B will become A under the same conditions. I call this process polarity for the following reasons. The magnet has a positive pole (A) and a negative pole (B). If the positive pole becomes negative under

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1. The literature relating to this subject is too extensive for detailed reference. See Hetzron 1967 for a survey. For conflicting arguments, see Speiser 1938.

the influence of a stronger magnet, i.e., if A becomes B, the negative pole will turn positive, B becoming A. (Meinhof 1912: 18–20)

A simple example involves the perfective/imperfective vocalic alternations (ablaut) in the verbal system of Classical Arabic (labis → yalbas ‘dress’ vs. ḍarab → yaḍrib ‘hit’), classically treated in terms of /a/ → /i/ vs. /i/ → /a/ polarity, that is, in terms of a reversible (or bi-directional) process.<sup>2</sup>

Afroasiatic nominal morphology is classically assumed to provide the clearest evidence for a polarity principle involving gender and number. As an often-cited example discussed in Hetzron 1967, 1972, the cardinal numbers from 3 to 10 in Arabic take the opposite gender of the noun they are in construction with.<sup>3</sup> Numerals with a feminine ending are used with masculine nouns (1a), and conversely, the masculine forms are used with feminine nouns (1b). [–Human] nouns that have a different gender in the plural clearly show, Hetzron argues, that the numeral agrees incongruently (i.e., in polaric gender opposition) with the underlying *singular* form (1c,d):

- (1) a. θala:θat<sub>u</sub> bani:na  
 three(f) sons  
 ‘three sons’
- b. θala:θu bana:t<sub>u</sub>  
 three(m) daughters  
 ‘three daughters’
- c. θala:θat<sub>u</sub> kutub<sub>in</sub> [sg. kitaab<sub>un</sub> (m)]  
 three(f) books(m)  
 ‘three books’
- d. θala:θu mudun<sub>in</sub> [sg. madi:nat<sub>un</sub> (f)]  
 three(m) cities(m)  
 ‘three cities’

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2. For a related discussion, see Guerssel and Lowenstamm 1996, in which a reanalysis of the phenomenon in terms of apophonic derivation is also provided.

3. Due to limitation of space, the present paper will only touch upon the syntax of Semitic number phrases. See, however, Halle’s (1990) short discussion of Hebrew numerals 2–19. Adapting his proposal, I will suggest that there is no “agreement” in (1a) in that the /-at/ ending of the numeral does not reflect the gender of the (either singular or plural) head noun. Rather, the /-at/ suffix is better understood as representing a particular form class, which in the default instance is associated with feminine gender (Rolf Noyer p.c.). Assuming this, the concord rule states that numerals of masculine nouns are assigned to the /-at/ form class, therefore it is part of the morphology rather than the syntax.

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