

# Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

## Construct forms of nouns in African languages

Denis Criessels, *Université Lumière (Lyon2)*

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The question addressed in my presentation is the extension of the notion of *construct state*, traditional in Semitic linguistics, to the description of languages belonging to other families.

*Construct forms of nouns* are defined as noun forms showing the following two characteristics:

- they are obligatory in the presence of certain types of noun dependents;
- they cannot be analyzed as an instance of possessive marking.

Cross-linguistically, the existence of such forms is not very common, nevertheless it is not limited to the Semitic languages.

In my presentation, I will propose terminological clarifications (concerning in particular the use of terms such as *construct form of nouns*, *case*, and *ezafe*) in order to lay the foundations of a cross-linguistic study of morphosyntactic phenomena likely to be viewed as particular manifestations of the same type of mechanism as the construct state of Semitic languages, and I will illustrate this approach by examining data from African languages belonging to various families.

In African linguistics, the existence of morphological variations of nouns triggered by the presence of certain types of dependents is widely acknowledged in descriptions of East African languages belonging to the Nilotic family (see for example *Andersen 2002* on Dinka), and a mechanism of this type is described by *Mous 1993* in the Cushitic language Iraqw, although there is no generally accepted label for such forms, and a variety of terms have been used in descriptions of individual languages. Conversely, some descriptive traditions use terms that may suggest some analogy with the construct state of Semitic languages, but which in fact refer to very different phenomena. In this respect, descriptions of Berber languages use the term *annexion state* or even *construct state* (*Penchoen 1973*) in a particularly misleading way, since in Berber languages, the choice between the “free/normal state” and the “annexion/construct state” of nouns has nothing to do with the internal structure of the NP, and exclusively depends on the status of the NP in the constituent structure of the clause. The parallelism with Gur languages proposed by *Elders 2003* is questionable too.

On the basis of data from Wolof (Atlantic, Niger-Congo), Hausa (Chadic, Afroasiatic), and Tswana (Bantu, Niger-Congo), I will show that construct form of nouns as defined above are found in languages the current descriptions of which present the phenomenon in terms that do not make immediately apparent its specificity, and I will discuss possible historical scenarios likely to lead to the emergence of construct forms of nouns.

### References

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