Proceedings
of the
Second International Congress
of Somali Studies

University of Hamburg
August 1-6, 1983

edited by
Thomas Labahn

VOLUME I

LINGUISTICS
AND
LITERATURE

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Absolute Constructions in Somali

1. The purpose of this paper is to justify the label of 'absolute constructions' applied in Antinucci (1981) and in Gebert (1981) to Somali subordinate clauses such as the following:

(1) 

\[ \text{isaqo isbaalka ku jira ayuu dhintay} \]
he-conj. hospital-the in stays F-he died
while in the hospital he died

(2) 

\[ \text{annagoo quriga fadhina ayay yimaadeen} \]
we-conj. house-the sit (restr.) F-they came
they came when we were at home

(3) 

\[ \text{jaale Siyaad isagoo booganaya daikaa Talyaaniga,} \]
comrade S. he conj. is-visiting (restr.) country Italy,
wuxuu yiri...
-the F-he said
comrade Siyaad, while he was visiting Italy, said...

(4) 

\[ \text{Caasha oo soorta karinaysa ayay, yimaadeen} \]
C, conj. food-the is-cooking (restr.) F-they came
they came when Caasha was cooking the food

(5) 

\[ \text{ninkii yimid, isagoo goolaya, wuu il dhiibay} \]
man-the came he conj. is-smiling (restr.) F-he
wargaddii
me-to handed letter-the
the man who came, as he was laughing, handed me
the letter

Specifically, I intend to demonstrate that Somali absolute constructions manifest all the formal and semantic characteristics attributed to absolute constructions (ACs) in Indo-European languages.

In Antinucci (1981) and Gebert (1981) we labelled these constructions as absolutes exclusively on semantic grounds. In other words, we based our judgement on the fact that their
adverbial function is to be deduced from the meaning of the sentence, without being overtly expressed by a subordinate marker.

Surprisingly enough, apart from semantic considerations, Somali expresses overtly a number of formal features usually assigned to these very constructions in different Indo-European dialects.

2. Let us define, first of all, the term 'absolute construction'. It refers to those constructions in Indo-European languages (Latin ablative absolute, Greek genitive absolute, Old Slavic dative absolute, etc.) that are composed of a nominal subject and a participial predicate. These clauses assume a particular oblique case feature and are embedded within an independent clause, an illustrated in the following Latin and Old Church Slavonic examples:

(6) Latin:
    omnibus relictis rebus
    all (abl.) left (abl.) things (abl.)
    everything having been left
    (Plautus, Cistellaria)

(7) Old Church Slavonic:
    obidajoštů pont skomu Pilatu Tjuchějo
    governing (dat.) from-Pont (dat.) Pilat (dat.)
    when Pontius Pilatus was governing Judea...

The function of ACs corresponds with the one manifested by subordinate adverbial clauses. The basic semantic difference between normal adverbial clauses and ACs is that the latter are not introduced by any conjunction and do not specify a precise subordinate relationship with the main clause, which can be recovered only on semantic grounds.

Berent (1973; 1975) assigns a number of formal characteristics to Indo-European ACs. We are going to consider them one by one and demonstrate that they are all present in Somali.

2.1 Berent (1973) points out that Indo-European absolutes are subordinate clauses of a participial form. As is well known, participles, being nominal forms of the verb, are noun modifiers and, as such, they are to be considered relative clauses (RCs).

Somali ACs are composed of relative clauses too. The only difference between Somali and Indo-European languages in this respect is that (1-5) manifest the usual way of RC formation in Somali, in which the verb is of finite form. On the other hand, Indo-European absolutes are always participial in form which is only one of the possible forms of RCs (their verbs may also appear in a finite form). Therefore, the derivational analysis of (1-5) is the following:

(1a) isaga [oo isaga-bee isbitaalka ku jira] ayuu dhintay
    he conj. he F hospital-the in stays (restr.) F-he died

(2a) annaga [oo annaga-bee guriga fadhina] ayay yimaadeen
    we conj. we F house-the sit (restr.) F-they came

(3a) jaalle Siyaad isaga [oo isaga-bee booganaya dalka]
    comrade S. he conj. he F is-visiting (restr.) country
    Talyaanka [wuxuu yiri -the Italy-the F-he said

(4a) Caasha [oo Caasha-bee soorta karinaysa] ayay
    C. conj. C. F food-the is-cooking (restr.) F-
    yimaadeen
    they came

(5a) ninkii yimid isaga [oo isaga-bee goslays] wuu
    man-the same (restr.) he conj. he F is-smiling
    li dhibay wargaddii
    me-to handed letter-the

(1a-5a) illustrate the derivation of relative clauses in Somali. According to the rule of RC formation in this language, the deleted noun phrase (NP) in the RC, coreferential with the modified noun (head noun (HN)) is always marked by the focus indicator (F) baa or ayaa (cf. Antinucci 1981). Only this analysis of Somali RCs accounts for the restrictive verb
endings, such as: jira, fadhina, boognaya, karinayna, gos-laya manifested by Somali verbs when the indicator of focus of assertion follows the sentential subject (cf. Puglielli 1980). 3

2.2 In his analysis of English absolutes, Berent (1975) points out that RCs occurring in ACs are non-restrictive structures. 4 This assumption is a result of a semantic analysis of RCs occurring in ACs, the modifying function of which does not consist in identifying the referent of the modified NP (the latter is a property of restrictive RCs) but simply in supplying additional information about it. In fact it is well known that descriptive RCs in languages derive from coordinate constructions and that they can be considered as half way between coordination and subordination. Therefore, according to Berent’s hypothesis, since RCs occurring in ACs are of the descriptive type, ACs are proper for languages undergoing syntactic change from a paratactic system to the hypotactic one (cf. section 3).

Now, interestingly enough, Somali provides overt evidence for the descriptive character of ACs. In other words, Somali absolutes are all NPs with the modifiers being descriptive RCs as is demonstrated by the oo marker occurring in these constructions. Somali actually uses the oo conjunction to introduce descriptive RCs (cf. Gebert 1980). Therefore, the presence of oo in all the sentences in which absolutes occur, is overt evidence of the descriptive character of these constructions. Additional proof, closely linked to the one mentioned above, is provided by the fact that the HNs of the ACs in Somali are always pronouns, or proper nouns or common nouns with the anaphoric article -kii/-tii. 5 It is well known that RCs, the HNs of which belong to one of the categories mentioned above, can be only of a descriptive type, since the referent of a proper noun, of a pronoun or of a common noun followed by the anaphoric article (used when the noun has been mentioned in a previous context) is always identified by

The definition.

2.3 There is one formal analogy between Indoeuropean and Somali absolutes, which concerns their syntactic status in the main clause. Namely, Indoeuropean ACs are nominal transforms (that is NPs) of a full verbal sentence. Berent (1973: 147) points out that “as a nominal sentence, the absolute may not exist outside of another full sentence, yet it is not syntactically dependent on any one constituent of that sentence.” Therefore, it appears formally as if the absolute were one of the nominal constituents of the main clause, manifesting an oblique case ending: ablative for Latin, genitive for Greek, dative for Old Slavic, etc. Usually the possibility to occur without any adposition in the sentence is a privilege reserved to direct objects. However, strangely enough, in many Indoeuropean languages we have sentences such as the following:

(8) Italian: ho lavorato 3 giorni/per 3 giorni
I have worked 3 days/for 3 days

(9) English: I have worked 3 days/for 3 days

(10) Italian: ho corso 100 metri/per 100 metri
I have run 100 meters/for 100 meters

(11) English: I am going there next summer/in the summer

In (8-11) adverbial constituents such as: 3 giorni (vs. per 3 giorni), 100 metri (vs. per 100 metri), or next summer vs. in the summer are not arguments of the respective verbs from a semantic point of view, but behave as such syntactically. They get somehow ‘appended’ to the verb since they are not introduced by any preposition, it is not possible to distinguish them formally from ‘real’ verb-arguments. Their adver-bial status can be recovered only semantically, not syntac-tically. Thus both simple and sentential adverbs behave
formally as nominal constituents in Indoeuropean languages.

Now, let us look at what happens in Somali in this respect. As already mentioned, Somali ACs are complex NPs composed of a HN modified by a RC. Such NPs behave like any other nominal constituent of the Somali sentence: for example they can be marked by the focus indicator baa/ayaa. Therefore, they behave somewhat like the Indoeuropean absolutes which occur in an oblique case like any other NP could.

Now, what is the syntactic function of the absolutes in the respective main clauses of the sentences illustrated in (1-5)? Let us eliminate the modifiers, leaving only the HNs of these constructions:

(1b) *isaga...ayuu dhiintay
    he            F-he died
(2b) *annaga...ayay yimaadeen
    we            F-they came
(3b) *jaalle Siyaad isaga...wuxuu yiri...
    comrade S. he          F-he said
(4b) *Caasha...ayay yimaadeen
    C.            F-they came
(5b) *nikii yiisud isaga...wuu li dhiibay wargaddii
    man-the came he              F-he me-to handed letter-the

(1b-5b) are ungrammatical because the respective nominal nouns by themselves do not have any syntactic function in the sentence. Specifically, in (1b) isaga, coreferential with the subject of the verb dhiintay, is not the subject of the sentence since the focus indicator marking it in this sentence is followed by the pronominal copy of the subject. As is well known in Somali syntax, the pronominal copy of the subject can follow the focus indicator only if it does not refer to the subject. As for (2b) and (4b), the independent character of the NPs without the respective modifiers is even clearer, since annaga and Caasha are not coreferential with the subject of the respective main verbs. Given the meaning of these verbs, annaga and Caasha cannot occur in their sentences alone, without the modifiers. In fact, if they were nominal constituents of the respective main clauses, their pronominal copies and a prepositional particle u, "to", should occur in front of the main verb, according to the rule of simple sentence formation in Somali (cf. Puglielli 1981). In such case we would have:

(2c) annaga ayay noo yimaadeen
    we F-they us-to came
    they came to us
(4c) Caasha ayay u yimaadeen
    C. F-they to came
    they came to Caasha

(2c) and (4c) contrasted respectively with the ungrammatical (2b) and (4b) illustrate this rule. It says that any non-subject NP in the Somali simple sentence has its pronominal copy in front of the verb. In (2c) the pronominal copy is na, "us", whereas the pronominal copy of the 3rd person (Caasha) is realized as g. On the other hand, as is known, the oblique relation between the verb and its argument is expressed by a prepositional particle (in our case u) whose place is in front of the verb, after pronominal copies of the non-subject NPs: na + u —> noo (cf. Zholkovski 1971).

(3b) is a special case, since the modified NP within the absolute is a pronoun, isaga, coreferential with a proper noun jaalle Siyaad. (3b) is ungrammatical because there is no way you can repeat the subject of the sentence by using its pronoun: Somali does not allow it. Isaga apparently is there to build one more nominal constituent into the sentence, which with its modifier becomes an absolute construction. With the elimination of this pronoun, adverbal interpretation disappears and the RC is just a modifier of the subject:

(12) jaalle Siyaad oo booganaya daika Taylorengi
    comrade S. conj. is-visiting (restr.) country
    wuxuu yiri
    Italy F-he said
    comrade Siyaad who is visiting Italy, said...
The same holds true for (5b) in which the pronoun isaga is coreferential with the subject: it is a common noun followed by the anaphoric article kil which is used with nouns whose referents are recovered from the preceding context. Thus a formal difference between the RCs occurring within the ACs and other RCs is that the HNs of the latter are nominal constituents of the main verb unlike the HNs of the former. Compare in this respect the example (5b) with the following:

(5d) ninkii yimid wuu ii dhibay wargaddii
man-the came (restr.) F-he me-to handed letter—he
the man who came handed me the letter

We can eliminate the modifier of ninkii and the sentence is still grammatical, since ninkii is one of the nominal constituents of the main clause.

Therefore, only the whole complex NP qualified in Somali as AC appears as a nominal constituent of the main clause. As any other nominal constituent of the sentence, it can be followed by the focus indicator; it does not have an overt pronominal copy in front of the verb because the copy of the 3rd person is Ø.

Notice that assigning the status of nominal constituents of the sentence to the adverbials, is a systematic rule in Somali (except for some space adverbials). In other words, what has been shown in (6-11) for English and Italian as a possibility, is systematically realized in Somali in which adverbials behave like nouns. The following examples illustrate this characteristic of Somali:

(13) si wanaagsan buu u goray
manner good F-he in wrote
he wrote it well

(14) berri bay Caasha tegaysaa
tomorrow F-she C. is leaving
Caasha is leaving tomorrow

(15) xamar buu Cali ka shageeyaa
Mogadishu F-he C. in is-working

Calli is working in Mogadishu
sandugii hoos buu u dhacay
box-the down F-he to fell
the box fell down

As can be seen in (13-16) the adverbials berri, si wanaagsan, xamar, hoos behave like any other NP in the Somali sentence. This means that there is no formal difference between them and nominal constituents, since they can be marked by the focus indicator (cf. (13-16)), they have their pronominal copy in front of the verb (which is Ø in this case) and in some cases they require the insertion of a prepositional particle (y in (13) and (16) and ka in (15)). It has been shown that such particles occur in front of the verb in Somali when the relation between the verb and the nominal constituent of the sentence is of an oblique type.

The above data demonstrate that Somali is very flexible as far as the insertion of additional NPs in the simple sentence is concerned. This possibility can be extended to complex NPs (cf. Antinucci 1981). Thus ACs become syntactically nominal constituents of the main clause like any other adverbial.

This is not the case for NPs functioning as HNs of RCs within the ACs since they cannot have any adverbial value, when occurring without their modifiers.

In conclusion, the possibility that a HN of a RC functions as a constituent of the main clause is a formal feature distinguishing ACs from ‘regualr’ RCs in Somali.

2.4 There is a second formal difference between Somali RCs and ACs, corresponding to one of the characteristics of Indo-European absolutes. Namely, it has been pointed out by Berent (1975) that absolute constructions are not tense-marked. This is exactly the case of Somali ACs. As can be seen in the above examples (1-5), all the verbs of ACs are in the present tense, irrespective of the tense manifested by the main verb. This constraint is so strong that the examples (1-5) become ungrammatical if we change present to past, according to the
tense of the main verb:

(1e) *isagoo isbaalka ku jiray ayuu dhintay
    he-conj. hospital-the in stayed F-he died
(2e) *annagoo guriga fadinay ayay yimaadeen
    we-conj. house-the sit (past) F-they came
(3e) *jaalle Siyaad isagoo booganay  dalka
    comrade 5. he-conj. was-visiting country-the
    Talyaaniga wuxuu yiri
    Italy-the F-he said
(4e) *Caasha oo soorta karinaysay ayay yimaadeen
    C. conj. food-the was-cooking F-they came
(5e) *ninkii yimid isagoo qoslayay wuu ii dhiibay wargaddii
    man-the came he conj. was-smiling F-he me-to handed
    the letter

This does not happen in regular RCs in Somali in which verbs are tense-marked exactly as the verbs of the main clauses. The following examples illustrate the use of the past in RCs:

(17) ninkii yimid wuu ii dhiibay wargaddii
    man-the came F-he me-to handed letter-the
    the man who came handed me the letter
(18) gabadha rootiga keentay waa walaashay
    girl-the bread-the brought F sister-sy
    the girl who brought the bread is my sister

Thus, the tense-marking is another feature that differentiates formally RCs of ACs from other RCs in Somali.

3. Berent (1973) claims that ACs are proper to languages which have not completely developed a hypotactic system. Specifically, he considers such constructions as characteristic to languages undergoing a syntactic change from parataxis to hypotaxis. These claims refer to Indo-European languages that started manifesting ACs at the Proto-Indoeuropean stage of their development. Berent points out that subordinate clauses in Proto-Indoeuropean were typically RCs of participial type (cf. Berent 1973). This provides evidence for the well-known theory, according to which subordinate clauses in languages have developed from coordinate structures (cf. Lehmann 1974; 1978).

Now, going back to Somali, its subordinate clauses are all syntactically RCs as was demonstrated by Antinucci (1981). Thus, from a typological point of view, Somali behaves like Proto-Indoeuropean as far as the subordination system is concerned, including absolute constructions which are a special kind of subordinate clauses. According to Berent's theory, Somali as a language in which ACs occur, should be in transition from the paratactic system to the hypotactic one. Interestingly enough, Somali can be considered as illustrating overtly such a transition. In fact, as was shown by Gebert (1980), some of its coordinating conjunctions also occur as subordinating ones, such as oo or ee introducing RCs, in support of the hypothesis according to which subordinate clauses in languages have developed from a special case of coordination.

4. In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that Somali complex NPs with adverbial function such as the ones illustrated in (1-5), which do not specify a precise subordinate relationship with the main clause, manifest all the formal characteristics of Indo-European absolute constructions. Namely, they are RCs of a descriptive type, they behave as if they were arguments of the main verb and they are not tense-marked. The occurrence of ACs in Somali is correlated to its system of subordination in which all subordinate clauses are RCs. Such a situation is posited for the Proto-Indoeuropean stage of development of Indoeuropean languages.
FOOTNOTES

1 Berent (1973) claims that ACs are already present in Proto-Indoeuropean in which all relative clauses are of participial character. However, the possibility of having RCs in which verbs are either finite or participial in form, is manifested in Indo-European dialects (cf. Latin or Old Slavic).

2 For the description of focus indicators in Somali cf. Andrzejewski (1975) and Puglielli (1980). Briefly, in every well-formed Somali sentence there must be an indicator of focus of assertion baa/ayaa/waxaa (marking NPs) or waa (marking the verbs).

3 The extensive verb endings are respectively: jiraa, fadhinaa, booganaya, karinaa, goslayaa. The terms 'restrictive' and 'extensive' are of Andrzejewski.

4 As is well known, there are two types of relative clauses: restrictive ones that identify the referent of the modified NP and descriptive RCs containing additional information about the NP referent, not necessary for its identification.


6 For the distribution of pronominal copies with the focus indicators, cf. the rules in Puglielli (1981) and a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in Gebert (in print).

7 The term 'prepositional particle' is of Andrzejewski.

8 Na combined with the prepositional particle u gives noo.

9 These problems are discussed in Puglielli (1981).

10 I am indebted to Prof. B. W. Andrzejewski for this observation.

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