
The diachronic stability of uninflectedness in Berber

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Most varieties within Berber, a language family indigenous to northern Africa within the Afroasiatic phylum, have a robust system where nouns are inflected for “state”, usually with two choices: the citation form (“free state”), and a marked form (traditionally misnamed the “construct state”) whose precise distribution varies from language to language, sometimes interacting with information structure, but used primarily for postverbal nominatives and objects of prepositions. Depending on the language, this has variously been analysed as a marked-nominative case system (König 2008) or as a typologically unique phenomenon (Mettouchi & Frajzyngier 2013). In all known Berber varieties with “state” inflection, however, it applies only to nouns with a gender-marked prefix, which a substantial minority of nouns do not have; in some cases, even nouns with such a prefix are uninflected for originally phonological reasons (Prasse 1974). Many (not all) nouns borrowed from Arabic or Romance are thus uninflected for state (Kossmann 2013); but so are a number of inherited terms, some of which – like basic kinship terms – are unambiguously reconstructible as such for proto-Berber. There are plausible instances of the extension of state marking to previously uninflected nouns (Brugnatelli 1997), but in no language has this been generalised across the board to make all nouns inflected. Comparative Berber data thus makes it possible to show that selective uninflectedness can be diachronically stable over a period of some two millennia.

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