

Accusative by Default: Revisiting Case Assignment in Arabic

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Schütze (2001) posits that Universal Grammar employs a default case mechanism, which assigns case to nominals that do not receive case marking through syntactic assignment or other means. Arabic has been classified as a nominative-default language, where caseless forms appear in the nominative case (Caha 2024). This study presents evidence that, contrary to this assumption, the default case in Arabic is accusative. It further proposes a refinement to default case theory by distinguishing between lexical default case and syntactic default case.

Several observations support the claim that Arabic defaults to the accusative rather than the nominative. One crucial piece of evidence comes from Standard Arabic plural morphology: human masculine plurals exhibit two forms based on syntactic position—*-u:n* in nominative contexts and *-i:n* in accusative and genitive environments, as shown in the following examples:

	Singular	Nominative plural	Accusative and genitive plural
1.	<i>muʕallim</i> ‘a teacher’	<i>muʕallimu:n</i>	<i>muʕallimi:n</i>
2.	<i>muhandis</i> ‘an engineer’	<i>Muhandisu:n</i>	<i>Muhandisi:n</i>

In Arabic vernaculars, where nominals lack overt morphological case marking, only the accusative forms of such elements are retained. For instance, in Levantine Arabic, the plural form of a teacher, i.e., *ʔimʕalmi:n*, is exclusively used, with no nominative counterpart.

Secondly, in Standard Arabic, many nouns that function as adverbs bear the suffix *-an*, which corresponds to the accusative case marker found on nominals. Notable examples include *ʔabadan* ‘never’ and *ʕumu:man* ‘generally’.

Thirdly, evidence arises from the syntactic behavior of diptotes, a class of nouns that lack the full range of case endings. Unlike triptotes, which exhibit full declension with *-u*, *-a*, and *-i*, diptotes are restricted to *-u* and *-a*, never taking *-i* in the genitive case unless marked as definite. Crucially, when a diptote appears in a genitive context, it surfaces in the accusative rather than the nominative form.

Building on this, I argue that the default case in Arabic is accusative rather than nominative. Furthermore, given the fact that denominal adverbs in Arabic exhibit case marking—a fact previously noted by researchers such as Magidow (2009)—and that these adverbs do not participate in any Agree relation, I propose that nominals and denominal adverbs are stored in the lexicon with an inherent lexical default case, which can be altered once the element enters an Agree relation. In other words, such elements enter the derivation

with a pre-specified case value, which may change depending on the syntactic environment and structural position of the element.

For elements that fail to establish an Agree relation—whether due to the inactivity of accessible goals or other syntactic constraints—their lexical default case remains unaltered and is ultimately realized at the interface according to the language’s morphosyntactic rules. In Arabic, I propose that such elements receive accusative case as their default realization.

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