There exists a rich system of nominal declension in Mongolic languages. The cases found universally are the nominative, genitive, accusative, dative-locative, ablative, and instructive.

The nominative case has no special marking and, thus, coincides with the bare stem of the word. The oblique cases are expressed by agglutination of special suffixes to the stem. At the same time, the bare unmarked stem can also frequently be used in the meaning of oblique cases, cf. Khalkh. *Ulaanbaatar yawaw = Ulaanbaatar-t yawaw* ‘[I/you/he] went to Ulan-Batur’.

One can easily see that, from the point of view of contensive typology, the structure of the Mongolic case paradigm demonstrates a complex of nominative-type features. The subjects of both intransitive and transitive verbs are expressed by the nominative case, whilst the special accusative expresses the direct object; also the genitive, as some researchers (I. Meščaninov, G. Klimov and others) assume, mainly correlates with the nominative type. Nor does the existence of unmarked stem-forms in oblique case functions contradict the nominative typology: the same situation holds in many other unquestionably nominative languages, including Turkic, Finno-Ugric, some Indo-European, and others.

The nominal stem in Mongolic mostly remains unchanged when affixed (although in some languages the omission of a non-phonemic reduced vowel is possible, as in Khalkh. *chono ‘wulf’, acc. *chon-yg; oron ‘place’, acc. *orn-yg). Exceptions to this rule are the so-called “nouns with unstable final -n”’. Essentially they have two stems differing by the presence/absence of final -n. In Khalka-Mongolian, Buryat and Kalmyk the rules that regulate the use of these two stems before case markers are mostly identical. The stem with -n is used in the genitive, the dative-locative and the ablative cases; thus with the word for ‘horse’ (Khalkh. *mor’, Bur. *morin, Kalm. *Mörn*):


vis-à-vis the stem without -n in the accusative and the instructive cases:


However, in the nominative case there exists a difference: the -n is absent in Khalkha-Mongolian, but present in Buryat and Kalmyk:


As for the classical written language (‘WMong. = Written Mongolian), it demonstrates yet another situation, having -n in all cases without exception:


Among Mongolists an opinion exists that in such nouns the stem with -n is primary, and the stem without -n has evolved from it as a result of phonetic reduction. However, a number of facts testify against this interpretation.

Firstly, both presence and absence of the -n are possible under identical phonetic conditions. Thus, in Khalkha-Mongolian the ablative and the instructive cases are marked by phonetically similar affixes -oos and -oor. Therefore, a stem affixed by them might be expected
to behave in the same way in the two case-forms; but in fact the ablative is morin-oos, and the instructive mor-ior, with different stems.

On the other hand, if the hypothesis of phonetic reduction is accepted, then the facts of the classical written language will be interpreted as an archaism, and the situation existing in contemporary Khalkha, Buryat and Kalmyk, as an innovation. Because of the great phonetic conservatism appropriate to the classical language, this conclusion would seem to be quite attractive. However, it contradicts the fact that the two-stem alternation is not alien to the classical written language itself.

As a matter of fact, “nouns with unstable final -n” demonstrate a two-stem alternation not only before case markers, but also in particular environments where these markers are absent — i.e. the syntactic positions of subject and nominal predicate, which correspond to the nominative case, and the positions of unaffixed object and adnominal attribute. In the individual languages the following picture is observed.

Subject: Khalkh. mor' yawna, Bur. morin yabana, Kalm. mörn yowna, WMong. morin yabumui ‘a horse goes’ (in Khalkha the form without -n, in all other languages with -n).

Direct object: Khalkh. mor' bariw, Bur. mori bariba, Kalm. mör bärw, WMong. mori baribai ‘[I/you/he] caught a horse’ (everywhere without -n).

Adnominal attribute: Khalkh. morin jil, Bur. morin jil, Kalm. mörn jil, WMong. morin jil ‘the year of horse (in the 12 years cycle)’ (everywhere with -n).

Non-final element of a compound noun phrase: Khalkh. mor' xon', Bur. mori xonin, Kalm. mör könn, WMong. mori xonin ‘a horse and a sheep’ (everywhere without -n).

It is clear that in all cases except for the expression of subject, the use of the forms with -n and without -n is identical in all the languages. Hence we must conclude that the difference of two stems in the nouns under consideration already existed in the Proto-Mongolic period, and even then was already used as a mean of word inflection. Thus, the element -n was from the very beginning a separate morpheme – an increment, added to a primary unaffixed stem in order to modify it in certain syntactic positions (inter alia, before some case markers).

It is plausible that, in the opposition of the independently functioning forms mori and morin, the increment -n was itself originally a marker of some case. What case would this be? In our opinion, many questions can be solved if we identify it as a marker of ergativity.

In fact, the presence of a special (quasi-)case marker -n in the subject but not in the object, demonstrated by most of the Mongolic languages (Written Mongolian, Buryat, Kalmyk), is analogous to case-marking with transitive verbs in ergative languages, where the subject is expressed by the ergative case bearing a special marker, and the object, by the absolute case, which usually has no materially expressed marking. The peculiarity of Khalkha-Mongolian (as well as of Inner Mongolian dialects), consisting of the absence of -n in the subject form too, can be explained as a relic of the absolute case in the function of subject of intransitive verbs. The Common Mongolic use of the n-form in the function of adnominal attribute is similar to the syncretic marking of subject and attribute that is typical for the ergative case. Finally, the absence of -n in non-final conjuncts of a compound noun phrase can be explained as a result of group flexion, whereby a postpositive case marker (here the ergative) is added to a group of conjoined parts as a whole, specifically to its last element.