

The Interaction of Tense, Aspect, and Agreement in Amharic Syntax

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1. Introduction

There are some forms in Amharic morphosyntax whose properties have received little attention in works like Cohen (1970), Haylu and Bender (1978), Hartmann (1980) and Leslau (1995), among others. In all of these, such forms are mentioned as auxiliaries, with very little description made about their internal structure and interaction with other functional categories. The only independent account to date is Kapeliuk (1965) which is a description of their syntactic and pragmatic functions. Like in other similar descriptions on the language, there is no distinction made between morphosyntactic and pragmatic levels.

In this paper, I intend to provide a detailed description of the forms, and their interaction with other categories like agreement and aspect. The purpose is to show their internal structures, pattern of interactions, and the effect of these in the derivation of clause structures. Furthermore, I show the position of Amharic in light of Generative and Typological claims about the layering of functional categories.

The objects of description are auxiliaries, aspect, tense and nominal inflections, of which, the first, that is, auxiliaries include the following two sets:

- | | | |
|------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| (i) | Modal auxiliaries: | |
| | ğämmär | ‘begin’ |
| | hon- | ‘become’ or ‘happen’ |
| | nor- | ‘exist’ |
| | čäl- | ‘can/may’ |
| | k’ärr- | ‘remain’/ ‘fail to come’ |
| (ii) | Existential auxiliaries: | |
| | nä- | ‘be’ |
| | all- | ‘exist’ |
| | näbbär /k’oyy- | ‘existed’ |

The description is presented in four sections. In 2 I consider the internal structures of the above forms. This is followed by a discussion of their interactions with agreement and aspect in 3. In 4, I show the relation between aspect and tense, and finally, in 5, I provide a summary of the whole discussion.

2. Internal Structures

All the forms in set (i) and (ii) above are characterized by a process of root reduction as a result of which they show two, and in some extreme cases, only one of their three root consonants in surface forms. This is in contrast with most other verbs in the language, and in Semitic in general, where verbal roots are typically tri-literal (McCarthy 1982; Yimam 1999(b)). Pluri-, bi- and mono-literals are derivatives which result from a process of extension or reduction of root consonants. Except ğämmär

‘begin’, all the forms in set (i) are bi-literal, and except nābbār ‘was’, those in set (ii) are mono-literal derived from trilateral bases through reduction, again. The root consonants affected by the process are /h,ʔ,w and y/, known as gutturals in the literature, (Beyene 1972). Except nābbār ‘was’ and ǧämmār ‘begin’, the forms in the two sets show one or more of these consonants at some level in their derivations.

1. Set (i):	root	stem	
	n-w-r	nor-	‘live’
	h-w-n-	hon-	‘become or happen’
	k-y-l-	čal-	‘can’
	k’-r-ʔ	k’är-	‘remain’/ ‘fail to come’
set (ii):	h-l-w-	all-	‘exist’
	k’-w-y-	k’oy-	‘stay’

In set (i), /w/, /y/ and /ʔ/ appear in the roots but not in the corresponding stems. In set (ii), /h/ and /w/ in the first root, and /w/ found in the second root, are missing in the corresponding derived stems.

Argument in support of this claim comes from the vowel that is inserted between root consonants in the derivation of stems in general. The vowel is invariably the mid-central vowel /ä/, and it undergoes a process of fronting, backing, or lowering depending on the type of root consonant immediately preceding or following it. The vowel changes to /o/ before /w/; to /e/ before /y/; and to /a/ before or after /h/ or /ʔ/. Consider, for example, the derivation of the following stems, (details, in Yimam 1999(a)).

2.	/n-w-r / >	/näwr-/ >	[nor-]	‘live’
	/h-l-w/ >	/hällw-/ >	[all-]	‘exist’

In the first stem, the vowel /ä/ has undergone backing due to the following glide /w/, which deletes afterwards. In the second stem, the same vowel has undergone lowering because of the preceding /h/, which again deletes. The ultimate consonant /w/ has also been deleted and the consonant preceding it gets geminated.

Further evidence comes from the nominal counterparts of such stems, since they show the missing root consonant in the same position. Consider, for example, the nominal counterparts of the above verbs in (2):

3.	nāwar-i	‘dweller’
	hälliw-inna	‘existence’

The consonants that are missing in the surface forms of the verbs in (2) show up in the nominal counterparts.

The third evidence comes from the infinitival and intensive forms of verbs with missing root-final consonants. Such forms show the segment /t/ in the position of the missing consonant as we can observe from the following:

4.	root	intensive	infinitive	
	/k’-r-ʔ/	[k’irri-t]	[mä-k’rä-t]	‘remain’

The segment /t/ appears in the same final position where the root consonant /ʔ/ is expected. These are regular phonological processes in stem derivations in the language in general, (see Beyene 1972; Hylu and Bender 1978; among others).

As stated earlier, a typical formal property of auxiliaries in Amharic is loss of root consonant(s). As a result of this, they also show partial or total loss of their lexical meaning. In this regard, the mono-literal auxiliary all- is a good example, since it has lost its meaning as an existential verb because of the loss of two of its three root consonants. As is well known in Semitic, root consonants

constitute the core meaning of verbals and substantives, (MaCarthy 1982) which means that if forms lose root consonants they become semantically almost null, and thus begin to serve as functional elements, carrying affixes of nominal and/or verbal features which are otherwise found in regular predicates.

Another common property of forms with eroded roots is lack of productivity. Compared to healthy roots, eroded roots, that is, auxiliaries, serve as base for the derivation of much fewer words. However, like main verbal predicates, auxiliaries show inflections for person, gender or number, but unlike the affixes of main verbs, the person affixes of auxiliaries are accusative, (Fullas 1972; Haile 1970). This is particularly true of the auxiliary verb nä- ‘be’, whose inflectional paradigm is shown in (5).

5. sg.	1.	nä-ññ	‘I am’	pl.	nä-n	‘we are’
	2m.	nä-h	‘you are’		nä-aččih-u [naččih ^w]	‘you are’
	f.	nä-h-i [näš]	‘you are’		nä-aččih-u [naččih ^w]	‘you are’
	3m.	nä-u	‘he is’		nä-aččä-u [naččäw]	‘they are’
	f.	nä-at [nat]	‘she is’		nä-aččä-u [naččäw]	‘they are’

Compare these object suffixes with their nominative counterparts in the following paradigm of the perfective stem säbbär- ‘broke’:

6. sg.	1	säbbär-ku	‘I broke’	pl.	säbbär -n	‘we broke’
	2m	säbbär- h	‘you broke’		säbbär -aččihu	‘you broke’
	f	säbbär- š	‘you broke’		säbbär -aččihu	‘you broke’
	3m	säbbär- ä	‘he broke’		säbbär- u	‘they broke’
	f	säbbär- äčč	‘she broke’		säbbär- u	‘they broke’

Furthermore, auxiliary verbs like nä- ‘be’ and all- ‘exist’ are always suffixing whereas main verbs are prefixing in the imperfective aspect, (see below), and suffixing in the perfective aspect as shown in (6) above. Since suffixing-prefixing is a formal property that distinguishes aspectual types in Amharic, one would argue that auxiliaries, as functional elements, are not subject to such characterization, because aspect is a feature that is distinctive of thematic predicates of events, actions and states. One could simply make a descriptive generalization that auxiliaries behave like perfective stems in their pattern of affixation in that they are all suffixing.

Among the modal verbs, /k’ärr-/ serves as a lexical negative predicate in structures like (7):

7. (a) Aster tä-ññit -a k’ärr- äčč¹
 A md-sleep:cmp- 3sg.f.gen. remain-3sg.f.
 lit ‘A. having slept, (she) remained’/ ‘Aster remained asleep’
 ‘She did not wake up’
- (b) Aster tä-näst -a all- äčč
 A. md-rise:cmp 3sg.f.gen. aux-3sg.f.
 ‘Aster has woken up’

¹ Note the following abbreviations:

acc.	accusative	incp.	inceptive	op.	operator	pst	past
agr.	agreement	impf	imperfective	pf.	Perfective	s	subject
asp.	aspect	m	masculine	pl.	plural	sg.	singular
aux.	auxiliary	md.	middle	prg.	progressive	tns	tense
cmpl	completive	mod.	modal	prs	present		
f.	feminine	neg.	negative	pros.	prospective		
gen.	genitive	o.	object	ps	passive		

7(b) is the affirmative counterpart of 7(a) and it shows the auxiliary all- ‘exist’ in the same position where k’ärr-äčč occurs in (a). k’ärr- ‘remain’ = ‘not woken up’ takes all- as its morphological counterpart in structures like (8) shows.

8. Aster al-tä -näss-ačč -im²
 A. neg-md-rise-3sg.f - comp
 ‘Aster has not woken up’

Furthermore, all- has scope over k’ärr- ‘remain’ in structures like (9), which is a paraphrase of 7(a).

9. Aster tä-ññit -a al- k’ärr- äčč-im
 A md-sleep.cmp. 3sg.f.gen neg-remain-3sg.f-comp
 ‘A. did not remain asleep’ = ‘A. has woken up’

Whereas k’ärr- is restricted to structures of gerunds (participles), its morphological counterpart (all-) occurs in all types of clauses.

As functional elements, auxiliaries interact with other categories in the derivation of various types of clauses as we shall observe in the sections that follow.

3. Aspect and agreement

In the preceding paradigm of the stem säbbär- ‘broke’, the aspectual stems are -säbr- for the imperfective and säbbär- for the perfective, each distinguished from the other by the aspectual vowel /ä/. The vowel occurs between the initial and the penult consonant of the root in the imperfective, and also between the penult and the ultimate in the perfective stem. Such stems express actions or events which are viewed as incomplete and complete, respectively (Comrie 1976). They also interact with agreement, tense and mood in the derivation of sub-aspectual types (Aktionsarten) (Binnick 1991, cited in Saeed 1999) and various expressions of mood. The time interval to which each aspectual type is anchored is referred to as tense, (Comrie 1985).

The two canonical aspectual stem types of Amharic show discrete affixes for the nominal features of person, gender or number as the following paradigm of the imperfective stem säbr- ‘break’ shows:

1 sg.	1.	?i-säbr	‘I break’	pl.	?i-n-säbr-	‘we break’
	2m	tī-säbr-	‘you break’		tī-säbr-u	‘you break’
	f	tī-säbr-i	‘you break’		tī-säbr-u	‘you break’
	3m	yī-säbr	‘he breaks’		yī-säbr-u	‘they break’
	f	tī-säbr-	‘she breaks’		yī-säbr-u	‘they break’

/?i -, tī - and yī -/, are first, second and third person prefixes, respectively. In perfective stems, they occur as /-hu, -h, and -ä/, respectively, as already shown in the paradigm in (6), in the preceding section. The gender marker /-i/ is also a suffix in both stem types. The number marker is /-n/ for first, and /-u/ for second and third persons, and like the gender marker, it is also a suffix in both stem types. In both types, person is obligatory and is followed by either gender or number. This linear ordering is, thus, as in (2):

2	Imperfective:			Perfective:		
	person	gender	number	person	gender	number
1.	?-	⊖	-n	-hu	⊖	-n
2.m	t-	⊖	-u	-h	⊖	-u >h ^w
f	t-	-i	-u	-h	-i >š	-u
3.m	y-	⊖	-u	-ä	⊖	-u
f	t-	⊖	-u	-t	-i > č	-u

² -m is a negative complementizer occupying the head position in CP. The verb goes all the way up to it in the derivation.

The ordering of the affixes can be generalized as: [person - stem- {gender, number}].

Looking at the morphophonemic processes in the perfective, between the second person marker/-h/ and the number marker/-u/, which are non-contiguous, and yet cause labialization of the former, one would wonder whether the number markers are in the position marked Θ , from which, they affect the person affix immediately preceding them. In other words, the number and the gender affixes occur alternately in the same position. If so, the ordering of the affixes in both stem types would have to be as in (3):

3.	Perfective:		Imperfective:		
	person	gender/number	person	gender/number	
1.	?-	-n	-hu	-n	
2.m	t-	-u	-h	-u	> h ^w
f	t-	-i	-h	-i	> š
3.m	y-	-u	-ä	-u	
f	t-	-	-t	-i	> č

The paradigm in (3) shows only two slots for the three distinct nominal features of person, number and gender. The person feature takes the first slot, and the remaining two features compete for the second slot, hence, forming a relation of complementary realization in which the apparent morphophonemic process takes place in a context of contiguity.

As the above two paradigms show, the two canonical aspectual types with which features of agreement interact follow the pattern in (4) where the numbers represent the root consonants:

4	(i)	-1ä23-	imperfective
	(ii)	1ä22ä3-	perfective

The imperfective stem allows a person prefix, and a gender or number suffix. The perfective stem allows person, and gender or number as an amalgam. This is also the pattern in other Ethiosemitic languages, (Rose 1996, 1997; Demeke 2003; Yimam 2004). However, in addition to the above two canonical types, I recognize four sub-aspectual types, three derived from the imperfective, and one derived from the perfective stem. I call these derived types, prospective, inceptive, progressive and completive, and show their internal structures in the table in (5).

5.

Asp : prospective Aux : näw~näbbär 'is' ~'was'	inceptive ğämmär 'begin'	progressive näw~näbbär 'is' ~'was'	completive all~näbbär 'exist' ~'was'
li - yi - säbr- pros-3sg.m.-break	yi - säbr- 3msg - break	ïyyä-säbbär-ä prg-broke-3sgm	säbr-o break-3sg.gen
li - yi - zäfn- pros-3sg.m- sing	yi - zäfn- 3sg.m-sing	ïyyä-zäffän-ä prg-sang-3sg.m	zäfn-o sing-3sg.gen
li - yi - fält'- pros-3sg.m -chop	yi - fält'- 3sg.m -chop	ïyyä-fallät'-ä prg-chopped-3sg.m	fält'-o chop-3sg.gen

The prospective is indicated by li-, and it shows an imminent or intended action. The stem is preceded by agreement affix for person and it is followed by the auxiliary verb nä- 'be' in the present, and by näbbär 'was' in the past tense. Like the imperfective, on which, it is built, the prospective is, thus, prefixing. The inceptive indicates an action which is beginning, and like the prospective, it is prefixing and it is followed by the modal auxiliary ğämmär 'begin', which, unlike other modals, does not show any inflection. The progressive is based on the perfective stem and it denotes an action which is in progress. This is indicated by the prefix ïyyä-, and unlike the other two types, this is suffixing, like its perfective base. It is also followed by the same auxiliaries of the prospective stem. The completive is the same as the prospective in its internal structure, but unlike the latter, it is suffixing

and the suffix is genitive, referring to a genitive subject. In the other types, affixes refer to nominative subject. The auxiliary is the existential all- in the present tense and its suppletive, näbbär ‘was’ in the past tense.

Although each sub-aspectual type is different from the other, the general pattern of affixation can be shown in the manner in (6):

6. [Aux[Agr[Asp. [Agr. [Asp[V]]]]]]

As can be observed, there are two levels of aspect and agreement, which I call internal and external. The former relates to the pattern of the canonical types and the latter to that of the non-canonical or sub-aspectual types. In what follows, I will show the interaction of these aspectual types with the category of tense, for which auxiliaries serve as formal expressions.

4. Aspect and Tense

In this subsection, I consider the way in which the two canonical and the four non-canonical aspectual types interact with the category of tense, which as already stated, relates events, states and actions designated by aspectual forms to some point or interval in a temporal continuum, (Comrie 1985). The forms which refer to this temporal point or interval are the existential auxiliaries, all-, nä- and näbbär, whose position is immediately after agreement affixes of stems when there are such affixes.

I shall consider each of the four aspectual types in relation to the two tenses, past and non-past, (Goldenberg 1964, 1988; Yimam 1987; Demeke 2003). The past is indicated by näbbär, and the non-past by its reduced form nä- ‘be’. Consider the examples in (1).

- 1 (a) Kasa ĩnc’ät lĩ -yi - fält’ nä-u³
 K wood pros-3sg.m.- chop.impf. aux-3sg.m.obj.
 ‘K. is (about)to chop wood’
- (b) Kasa ĩnc’ät lĩ - yi - fält’ näbbär-(ä)
 K wood pros-3sg.m- chop.impf aux - 3sg.m.subj.
 ‘K. was to chop wood’

Both structures are prospective, expressing an intended action of chopping. This could be in the past or present, (non-past) indicated by the respective auxiliaries, or by a temporal adverb such as ahun ‘now’ for present, and ĩnant ‘yesterday’ for past reference. However, the use of such adverbs does not always determine the type of tense; it only helps clear cases of indeterminacy between the present and the future, as we shall observe shortly.

As stated before, auxiliaries are thematically empty and that their function is to express tense and also to carry agreement suffixes. In light of this, consider the following structure of inceptive aspect.

³ The auxiliary nä- takes the suffix -u ‘3sg.m.obj.’ as its default irrespective of the type of subject. For example, consider the following structure where the subject is first person and the auxiliary shows a third person masculine object suffix. One would, perhaps, conjecture here that the suffix in the auxiliary may refer to a null pleonastic subject, in which case, such structures would be considered as bi-clausal.

ĩne ĩnc’ät ĩyyä-fällät’ - ku nä-u
 I wood prg-chop.pf-1sg be-3m.sg.obj.
 lit. ‘It is, I am chopping wood’

The idea of default form was brought to my attention by Girma Awigchew (p.c.).

2. Kasa ĩnc'ät yi - fält' ġämmär
 K. wood 3sg.m. - chop start (begin)
 'K. starts to chop/ or chopping wood'

The modal auxiliary ġämmär indicates that the action is beginning. The focus is on its initial phase which the auxiliary indicates. Note that the auxiliary does not carry any agreement affix; it is bare, and is, hence, different from its lexical counterpart ġämmär 'start' which does show inflections for such features as we can see from the perfective clause in (3):

3. Aster sĳra ġämmär-äčč
 A. work start:pf-3sg.f.
 'A. started work'

The tense in example (2) is ambiguous, between the past and the non-past. The ambiguity can be cleared when a temporal adverb is used. In other words, the stem of the inceptive aspect in (2), like that of the perfective in (3), does not show any overt morphological tense.

Unlike the prospective and the inceptive, the progressive expresses an on-going action. Its stem pattern is like that of the perfective, -1ä22äc-, but it shows the prefix ĳyyä- which indicates that the action is on-going, without reference to any specific time or duration. Such reference is possible when either of the two existential auxiliaries is used as in (4).

4. (a) Kasa ĩnc'ät ĳyyä-fällät' - ä nă-u
 K wood prg-chop.pf-3sg.m. aux-3sg.m.obj.
 'K. is chopping wood'
- (b) Kasa ĩnc'ät ĳyyä-fällät' - ä năbbär-(ä)
 K wood prg- chop.pf-3sg.m. aux - 3sg.m.
 'K. was chopping wood'

Finally, there is the completive aspect, whose stem is based on the form known as the gerund or con-verb, (Cohen 1970; Leslau 1995). It has the same internal structure as the imperfective except that it is only suffixing, whereas the imperfective is both prefixing and suffixing. The suffixes in the completive are also genitive, and it uses the same auxiliaries all- and năbbär for non-past, and past tense, respectively. All- shows person suffix in reference to nominative subject just as main verbs do. In other words, subjects are doubly referenced, first by a main verb, and second by an auxiliary such as all-.

The derivation of the six aspectual forms and their interaction with tense are shown in the table below:

5 aspect type	internal structure	Agreement type	external structure	tense type	tense affix/aux.
Perfective	1ä22ä3 -	suffix	Φ	±past	Φ
Imperfective	-1ä23-	prefix	Φ	± past	all~năbbär 'exist~was'
prospective	-1ä23	prefix	lĳ-	± past	nă~ năbbär 'be'~ 'was'
Inceptive	-1ä23	prefix	ġämmär	± past	Φ
Progressive	1ä22ä3 -	suffix	ĳyyä-	± past	nă~ năbbär 'be~was'
Completive	1ä23-	suffix	Φ	± past	all~năbbär 'exist~was'

As can be observed, there are two levels of aspectual derivations, internal and external. The former refers to the derivation of the two canonical aspectual stems, perfective and imperfective, whose derivation involves insertion of the aspectual vowel / ä/ between the consonantal roots. The latter employs the syntactic affixation of the aspectual elements *lī-*, *ǧämmär*, and *ïyyä-*. The various aspectual types are defined in terms of tense, past or non-past, indicated by auxiliaries, which occur following the aspectual stem, which also display agreement affixes. As stated earlier, tense auxiliaries also show agreement suffixes which means that a verbal complex may have two levels of agreement relation with its subject, from which the following affix ordering can be drawn:

6. [Agr[Tns[Agr[Asp[Agr[Asp[V]]]]]]]

The pattern shows that the verbal features of tense and aspect are each followed by the nominal features of agreement. In other words, for every verbal feature, there is an accompanying nominal feature, which makes the occurrence and position of the latter feature predictable. Furthermore, since agreement is a formal, and not a semantic requirement in verbs, it can be dispensed with as proposed in Chomsky (1995), and Demeke (2003), in which case (6) could be reduced to (7):

7. [Tns[Asp[[Asp[V]]]]]

It is difficult to think of a single example containing all aspectual types from which their hierarchical ordering could be deduced. Hence, one has to consider a set of structures like the following:

8. (a) Kasa *inč'ät fält'-o* *lībs yi- at'ib ǧämmär*
 K. wood chop.cmp-3sg.m.gen clothes 3sg.m.-wash mod.
 'K. having chopped wood, he started washing clothes'
- (b) Kasa *inč'ät fält'-o* *lībs ïyyä-at't'äb-ä yi- zäfn - ǧämmär*
 K. wood chop.cmp-3sg.m.gen. clothes prg-wash - 3sg.m. 3sg.m.-sing:impf-mod
 'K. having chopped wood, (he) was washing clothes (when) (he) started singing'
- (c) Kasa *inč'ät fält'-o* *lībs ïyyä-at't'äb-ä yi -zäfn - all*
 K. wood chop:cmp-3sg.m.gen. clothes prg-wash-3sg.m. 3sg.m.-sing:impf-aux
 'K. having chopped wood, he sings (while) washing clothes'
- (d) Kasa *inč'ät fält'-o* *lībs ïyyä-at't'äb-ä lī-yi- zäfn tä-zägäǧǧ -ä*
 K. wood chop.cmp-3msg clothes prg-wash-3ms pros-3ms-sing md-prepare:pf-3sg.m
 Lit. 'K. having chopped wood, (while) he washing clothes to sing he got prepared'
 'Having chopped wood K. got prepared to sing while washing clothes'
- (e) Kasa *lībs ïyyä-at't'äb-ä ǧänzäb aǧiñt-o lī- yi- hed yi-fällig -all*
 K. clothes prg-wash-3sg.m. money get-3sg.m.gen pros-3ms-go 3ms-want-impf-aux
 Lit. 'K. washing clothes he having got money to go he wants'
 'K. wants to go having got money (by) washing clothes'

In (a), the inceptive follows the completive and the reverse is not allowed. In (b) the completive is followed by the progressive, which, in turn is followed by the inceptive; again the reverse is not possible. In (c), the progressive is followed by the imperfective, and in (d) the prospective is followed by the perfective; and finally in (e), the progressive precedes the completive. From these, one can propose the following layering.

9. completive > <progressive > prospective > inceptive > perfective ~ imperfective > tense

interaction of agreement with the canonical aspectual types contributes partially to the form and function of the derived aspectual types.

The category of tense has two forms, non-past and past, the former is indicated by the auxiliary *all-* or *nä-*. The present auxiliary inflects for person in agreement with a nominative subject, which is at the same time identified by a genitive suffix in completive predicates. This seems to indicate that there is no relation between the case form of an argument and the agreement affix with which it is referenced. The agreement affixes specify the person, number or gender, and not the case type of an argument of a predicate. A subject argument has agreement relation with both main predicates and auxiliaries. In other words, they are doubly referenced but by different forms of affixes.

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