

Light Verb Constructions in Xamtanga and in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area

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1. Introduction

Light verb constructions (LVCs) involving an uninflected lexical base followed by the verb ‘to say’ have been recognized by several scholars (Ferguson, 1976; Tosco, 2000a; Zaborski, 1991) as a feature of the Ethiopian linguistic area. This type of construction is attested in Cushitic and in all Ethio-Semitic languages but not in Semitic spoken outside of East Africa (Appleyard, 2001: 1); it is therefore assumed that it was acquired in Ethio-Semitic under the influence of Cushitic, along with other features that bear witness to extensive language contact between the two families (Leslau, 1945, 1952). However, except for Hetzron (1972: 28), who suggested that LVCs in Ethio-Semitic may come from Northern Agäw, not much has been written on the specific source of the borrowing within the Cushitic family. Since Hetzron did not support his claim with linguistic data and since LVCs are only briefly mentioned in grammars of Agäw languages, his assumption most likely relies on the fact that Agäw (i.e. Central Cushitic) probably constitutes the main substrate of early Ethio-Semitic. The Agäw branch is divided into two major groups: Southern, with Awngi and Kunfal, and Northern, with Bilin, Xamtanga and Kemant. The aim of this paper is to address the role of Northern Agäw in the areal diffusion of LVCs. The first part of the paper provides a description of morphological and syntactic properties of LVCs in Xamtanga (approximately 213 000 speakers, Wag Ximra zone, Northern Ethiopia) based on data from the Abirgälle dialect¹. The second part deals with the distribution of transitivizing patterns of LVCs among languages of the Ethiopian linguistic area, arguing that transitivity can serve as an argument in favor of Hetzron’s hypothesis.

2. Light verb constructions in Xamtanga

2.1. General characteristics

A LVC is a type of complex predicate made of two elements: an uninflected lexical base (or ‘coverb’) and a light verb. The semantic content of the construction is mainly conveyed by the lexical base, while the verb carries marks for person and tense-aspect-mood, and determines the argument structure of the complex predicate (Baker & Harvey, 2010: 14-15). In Xamtanga, the light verb is always the quotative ‘to say’, root *y-*. The lexical base may be an ideophone (1), a verb root (2) or a phrase (3). The canonical word order of a clause being SOV, the lexical base is in the object position and directly precedes the light verb.

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¹ There are at least five dialects of Xamtanga: Sak’wät’ä (South East), S’agibği (East), Ziḳwālā (Central), Sämen (West) and Abirgälle (North). The Abirgälle dialect I work on does not correspond to Conti Rossini (1904)’s Khamta, which thus has to be considered either as a sixth dialect or as a distinct language.

- (1) *giziŋ-id* *xiiŋ* *y-u*
 dog-DEF IDEO say-PFV[3msg]
 ‘The dog growled’
- (2) *xar-id* *mulu* *xir* *y-u*
 night-DEF whole sleep say-PFV[3msg]
 ‘He slept the whole night’
- (3) *Säk’wät’ä-tis* *sa-s* *y-äk^w*
 Sekota-ABL down-ALL say-IPFV[3msg]
 ‘(The place) is a little bit down from Sekota’

2.2. Morphological properties of the lexical base

According to Appleyard’s cross linguistic study of LVCs in Ethiopian languages (2001), three different types of lexical base can be combined with a light verb. The first type refers to ideophonic elements that are not related to any other item in the language; the second one contains quotative lexical bases, that is items which exist as free-standing words in other syntactic contexts; and the last one includes lexical bases derived from a verb root by predictable process(es). The author remarks that derivational LVCs are particularly productive in Amharic and Tigrinya (Ethio-Semitic) as well as in Afar (Lowland East Cushitic), while other Ethiopian languages display only isolated examples of this type.

The three categories described above exist in Xamtanga. Ideophonic LVCs are the most frequent, as illustrated in Table 1.

a)	<i>a y-</i>	‘to open the mouth’	l)	<i>t’ir y-</i>	‘to sparkle (fire)’
b)	<i>fri y-</i>	‘to jump’	m)	<i>it’ t’is y-</i>	‘to sneeze’
c)	<i>tif/sič’ y-</i>	‘to spit’	n)	<i>g^wirimrim y-</i>	‘to mumble’
d)	<i>gix y-</i>	‘to belch’	o)	<i>šix^wšix^w y-</i>	‘to whisper’
e)	<i>sik’ y-</i>	‘to have the hiccups’	p)	<i>k’ik’^wk’^w(i) y-</i>	‘to cackle (chicken)’
f)	<i>tit’ y-</i>	‘to be different’	q)	<i>fuf y-</i>	‘to hiss (snake)’
g)	<i>g^wig^w y-</i>	‘to thunder’	r)	<i>fuf fuf y-</i>	‘to sting (wind)’
h)	<i>fič’ y-</i>	‘to whistle’	s)	<i>nyixi y-</i>	‘to show teeth (dog)’
i)	<i>täbiäb y-</i>	‘to stutter’	t)	<i>ir y-</i>	‘to gossip’
j)	<i>if y-</i>	‘to blow’	u)	<i>k^wät’k^wät’ y-</i>	‘to shiver’
k)	<i>xiiŋ y-</i>	‘to growl’	v)	<i>zim y-</i>	‘to be silent’

Quotative LVCs are rare and correspond to phrases in Xamtanga. In this type, the structure of the LVC is similar to the one of direct reported discourse: the lexical base stands for a quote introduced by *y-*. The few instances of such constructions found in my corpus are listed in Table 2.

a)	<i>sas y-</i>	‘to go down a little’	from	<i>sa-s</i>	down-ALL
b)	<i>daxnämä y-</i>	‘to greet’	from	<i>daxnä=mä</i>	good=INT

Contrary to the tendency observed by Appleyard, derivational LVCs are well attested in the language. They can be divided into two subtypes. Examples a) to e) show LVCs derived from normal verbal roots. When the root is monoconsonantal (in d) and e)), the lexical base is augmented by *-in* (possibly only *-n*, since *i* can function as an epenthetic vowel), a form that I could not relate to any identifiable source. The other examples are distinct because they are derived from bound verbal roots: *ğaq^w*, *s’iq^w*, *xir* or *minxi* cannot appear in isolation. To be employed as verbs, such roots need the light verb ‘to say’, and to be employed as nouns, they take the nominalizing suffix *-tä*, which typically derives agent and abstract nouns. Lexical bases of LVCs related to deverbal nouns are also attested in Amharic

(Amberber, 2010: 303): *zimm*+SAY ‘to be silent’ / *zimmi-ta* ‘silence’, *däss*+SAY ‘to be happy’ / *dässi-ta* ‘joy’. Like in Xamtanga, in Amharic these elements are bound verbal roots that cannot stand alone and take either a nominalizer or a light verb.

Table 3: Derivational LVCs

a)	<i>čiz y-</i>	‘to revive’	from	<i>čiz-</i>	‘to be better’
b)	<i>täk y-</i>	‘to stare’	from	<i>täk-</i>	‘to look like/seem’
c)	<i>čit y-</i>	‘to be a little bit different’	from	<i>čit-</i>	‘to be different’
d)	<i>fän y-</i>	‘to go out for a short time’	from	<i>f-</i>	‘to go out’
e)	<i>bin y-</i>	‘to disappear suddenly’	from	<i>b-</i>	‘to miss/disappear’
f)	<i>ğaq^w y-</i>	‘to appear suddenly’	↔	<i>ğaq^w-tä</i>	‘sunset’
g)	<i>s’iq^w y-</i>	‘to be silent’	↔	<i>s’iq^w-tä</i>	‘silence/silent person’
h)	<i>xir y-</i>	‘to sleep’	↔	<i>xir-tä</i>	‘tiredness/sleeping place’
i)	<i>minxi y-</i>	‘to smile briefly’	↔	<i>minxi-tä</i>	‘smile’

Finally, one last point worth mentioning is the fact that light verbs are often used to introduce loanwords. For instance, the following Ethio-Semitic verb roots, here given in their Ge‘ez form, are listed as “passed into Cushitic” by Leslau (1988): *säfäfä* ‘to float’, *käbrä* ‘to be honored’ (also *kibr* ‘respect’), *käbäbä* ‘to encircle’ (also *kibb* ‘round’), *gärämä* ‘to be awesome’ and *bäräk’ä* ‘to flash’. In Xamtanga, these roots are employed as lexical bases of LVCs, hence: *sifsif y-* ‘to float’, *kibir y-* ‘to be honored’, *kibb y-* ‘to go around in a circle’, *girim y-* ‘to be amazed’ and *barq y-* ‘to flash/scintillate once’. Note that a similar function of LVCs is reported in other Ethiopian languages (see Appleyard (2001) for Kemant, Leslau (1958: 73) for Harari, Meyer (2006) for Zay) and that it is a common phenomenon cross-linguistically to employ light verbs to integrate loan verbs (Wichmann & Wohlgemuth, 2008). The numerous instances of such lexical bases in Xamtanga lead one to think that loans constitute a fourth relevant category in a typology of LVCs.

2.3. Syntactic properties of the LVC

Except for ‘to blow’ (*if y-*), which is ambitransitive, all the LVCs of Xamtanga are intransitive. To transitive a LVC, the form *š-* occurs in the light verb position.

- (4) *T’ilahun* *η-arät-id* *sa-s* *š-u*
 T’ilahun POSS3msg-bed-DEF down-ALL say\CAUS-PFV[3msg]
 ‘T’ilahun lowered his bed a little’
- (5) *kibbä-d* *k’wät’k’wät’* *š-u*
 cold-DEF IDEO say\CAUS-PFV[3msg]
 ‘The cold made him shiver’

I suggest that *-š* is not a different light verb, but a derived causative form of ‘to say’. In the language, *-s* is the most productive valency-increasing suffix. It can act as a transitizer or as a causative (cf the difference between 6a and 6b below, both derived from the intransitive root *t’iy-* ‘to smoke’) and it is normally directly attached to the verb root.

- (6) a. *sigara* *t’iy-is-u* b. *t’iyä-d* *yiggis* *t’iy-is-i-č*
 cigarette smoke-CAUS-PFV[3msg] smoke-DEF 1sgDAT smoke-CAUS-PFV-3fsg
 ‘He smoked a cigarette’ ‘She made the (incense) smoke come to me’

In the case of transitive LVCs, my hypothesis is that the palatal feature of the root *y-* was transferred to the causative suffix *-s* through progressive assimilation, resulting in the frozen form *š-*. One important argument in favor of this analysis is that the non frozen form *y-s-* in transitive LVCs is reported by

Appleyard (2001: 8), who mainly collected data from the Ziq^walä and Simen dialects of Xamtanga in 1983, as well as by Reinisch (1884), whose description is based on the speech of an informant from Sak^wät'ä. Interestingly, in Amberber (1984)'s study, also based on the Sak^wät'ä dialect, LVCs are transitivized with *š*. We may thus assume that the causative of 'to say' is the original pattern in the language and that, at least in some dialects, *y-s-* evolved into the frozen form *š*.

Moreover, in my corpus *y-s-* is occasionally visible in a reduced form *i-s-* when followed by additional suffixes, for example with negation in (7) or double causation in (8).

- (7) *yiw-išt-äw* *xir-tä-z-u* *t'ila-d*
 give-MEPD-PART3msg sleep-NMLZ-GEN-POSDsg medicine-DEF
xir-i-s-i-y-äw-im
 sleep-say-CAUS-PFV-NEG-PART3msg-MVM
 'The sleeping pill that he was given did not make him sleep'

- (8) *Alämu-t-a* *gizij-id* *wit'-i-s-iz-u*
 Alämu-GEN-POSDsg dog-DEF IDEO-say-CAUS-CAUS-PFV[3msg]
 'Alämu's dog made me run'

In (8), *y-* is followed by a double causative *-s-z*. As mentioned above, *-s* is the most productive causative suffix in Xamtanga. The other causative morpheme, *-z*, is typically used in primary causation with a limited number of roots to derive verbs from adjectives and nouns (*abin* 'guest' / *abin-z-* 'to invite') and to transitivize stative verbs (*diq^w* 'to be fermented' / *diq^w-iz-* 'to brew'). However in double causation, which formally consists of the addition of a second causative morpheme directly after the first one, *-z* has a different and less clear distribution: it is employed with roots that do not seem to exhibit determining semantic or phonological properties in common and it never occurs in first position. Double causatives thus have either the shape *-s-s* or *-s-z* but never *z-s-* nor *z-z-*. Even though the details of the use of these two forms remain obscure, one definite statement that can be made is that in some cases *-s-s* and *-s-z* appear in free variation with the same verb. This is exemplified with the bound verb root *aqä-* in (9):

- (9) a. *aqä-t-* b. *aqä-s-* c. *aqä-s-s-* / *aqä-s-z-*
 wash-MEDP- wash-CAUS- wash-CAUS-CAUS-
 'wash oneself' 'wash something' 'make someone wash something'

A similar observation holds true for the verb 'to say' (compare (8) and (10)):

- (10) *gäw-t-i-z* *wit'-i* *wit'-i-s-s-u*
 be afraid-MEDP-DEF.OBL-DAT IDEO-say[CNV3msg] IDEO-say-CAUS-CAUS-PFV[3msg]
 'He ran because he was scared and it made me run (too)'

It follows from my analysis that the root *y-* is reduced to *i-* in (7), (8) and (10) and assimilated to the causative suffix *-s* in (4) and (5). This assumption is supported by the fact that other Xamtanga roots ending in *y* present a reduction of the glide before the causative: *ziy-* 'to drink' / *zi-s-* 'to invite someone to drink', *näy-* 'to give here' / *nä-s-* 'to bring here'. Furthermore, even when 'to say' is employed as a heavy verb, there is a strong tendency for the root to be either reduced (*y>i*) or totally assimilated (*y>Ø*) in spontaneous speech.

- (11) *ŋri-ŋin-d* *gwäyy-ir* *iği-räy-im*
 POSS3fsg-house-DEF sit-3fsg[CNV] COP.NEG-PART3fsg-MVM
(yi)-s-iz-i-č
 (say)-CAUS-CAUS-PFV-3fsg
 'She made (someone) say she was not at home'

Cohen et. al.'s statement (2002: 248), according to which phonetic attrition of the light verb reflects that it is in the process of morphologization, may explain why the frozen form *š* is only attested in the context of LVCs.

2.4. Alternative analyses of transitive LVCs

Before turning to the second part of the paper, I shall discuss briefly two possible alternative analyses of the form *š* used in transitive LVCs. The first one would be to connect *š* to the mediopassive derivation². Xamtanga has two productive mediopassive suffixes: *š* and *št*. As Appleyard (1987: 471) points out, a straightforward distinction between them is that *št* is systematically used with vocalic roots; consequently the passive of *y-* is *y-išt-*, not *y-iš-*. Moreover, *š* increases the valency of the LVC by introducing a participant with the semantic role of causer, a function typically associated with causatives rather than passives. The second alternative would be to relate *š* to the verb 'to do/make', for which Appleyard (2006: 55) reconstructs the roots **säb-*, **täb-/ʔab-* and **ʔis-* in Proto-Agäw. The Xamtanga verb 'to do', *s'ab-*, comes from **ʔab-*. Kemant *šäb-* derives from the same form with a different vowel, since there is a regular sound correspondence **ʔ > s'* in Xamtanga and *š* in Kemant. More interesting is the possibility that *š* derives from **ʔis-*, which has reflexes in several Agäw languages and dialects (some of which are no longer spoken): *ies-/eš-* in Chamir (the Sak'wät'ä dialect of Xamtanga studied by Reinisch), *eš-* in Quara, *es-* in Dembiya and *yesh-* in Falashan³. Nevertheless, on the one hand *š* never occurs for 'to do' as a heavy verb in Xamtanga, and on the other hand if *š* comes from **ʔis-*, the form *i-s-* in transitive LVCs in (7), (8) and (10) requires further explanations. Based on the evidences addressed in this section, I thus favor the hypothesis that LVCs are tranzitized by a frozen form of the causative of *y-* 'to say' in this language.

3. The role of Agäw in the areal diffusion of LVCs

3.1. The Ethiopian linguistic area

What is traditionally called the Ethiopian linguistic area includes languages nowadays spoken in Ethiopia and Eritrea. According to Lewis (2009), there are ninety-three languages in these two countries. Most of them belong to the Cushitic, Ethio-Semitic and Omotic families of the Afroasiatic phylum. Some Nilo-Saharan languages are found along the western borders.

The Ethiopian linguistic area is controversial. On the one hand, several scholars (Leslau, 1945; 1962; Ferguson, 1976; Zaborski, 1991; Tosco, 1994; Crass, 2002; etc.) have pointed out that languages of the area share a number of features which are likely to be the result of contact-induced change. On the other hand, the existence of a real linguistic area in Ethiopia has been questioned, notably by Tosco (2000a), the main argument being that the large majority of the languages are genetically related. Another problem concerns the limits of the area, since some features are encountered in languages beyond Ethiopia and Eritrea (Crass & Meyer, 2008: 228), and some others only characterize smaller subareas (Zaborski, 1991). Consequently, there is only little agreement regarding which features should be considered as areal, genetically inherited or the result of implicational universals (for more details see Crass & Meyer, 2008).

Despite this discussion, the Ethiopian branch of Semitic appears to have been strongly influenced by Cushitic. Several waves of contact can be identified. Because they used to be widely spoken in Northern and Central Ethiopia, Agäw languages probably constitute the main substrate of early Ethio-Semitic, while members of the other branches of Cushitic seem to have influenced Ethio-Semitic at a more subareal level.

3.2. LVCs in the Ethiopian linguistic area

With few other traits (SOV word-order, converb, quoting clause with 'to say', suppletive imperative of 'to come'), LVCs are generally accepted as a core-feature of the Ethiopian linguistic area.

² This is the analysis suggested in Darmon (2010). In light of the data presented in this paper, it must be rejected.

³ Except in Dembiya, **s* became *š* through palatalization due to the preceding *i* (Appleyard, 2006: 55).

Mentioned in the literature under the label ‘compound verbs’, ‘composite verbs’ or ‘descriptive compounds’, they are attested in the three families of the Afroasiatic phylum present in Ethiopia and Eritrea and at least in two Nilo-Saharan languages of the area, namely Kunama and Nera (Güldemann, 2005: 136-137). LVCs are reported in some Omotic languages (Kafa, Hamer, Wolaitta, Bench, Zargulla (Amha, 2010), Sheko (Hellenthal, 2010: 237)), but they appear to be much more frequent in Cushitic and Ethio-Semitic. As a matter of fact, these constructions exist in all the Ethio-Semitic languages - including a few occurrences in Ge‘ez (Hetzron, 1972: 18), the oldest attested language of this branch - whereas they are not attested in Semitic spoken outside of East Africa (Appleyard, 2001: 1). LVCs are thus an Ethio-Semitic innovation that is assumed to have been introduced in this branch through contact-induced change with Cushitic (Tosco, 2000a: 346; Cohen et al., 2002: 18; Meyer, 2009: 38).

The Cushitic family is divided into four branches: North (which consists of Beja alone), Central (Agäw), East, and South (languages spoken in Tanzania and Kenya)⁴. Hetzron (1972: 18) attributed the presence of LVC in Ethio-Semitic to an “early Cushitic (Northern Agäw?) influence”. As far as I know, he has been the only one to propose a specific origin for LVCs in Semitic. Unfortunately, he did not support his claim with data, nor did he explain his choice to exclude Southern Agäw (i.e. Awngi and Kunfal) from the possible source languages. In order to test Hetzron’s hypothesis, one has to take a closer look at the typology of LVCs in the Ethiopian linguistic area.

3.3. Two patterns of transitive LVCs

The main criterion retained to classify LVCs of Ethiopian languages in previous studies is the transitivity of the constructions (Appleyard, 2001: 8; Cohen et al., 2002: 19; Meyer, 2009: 35). If all languages employ the light verb ‘to say’ in intransitive LVCs, they make use of two different strategies to introduce an object. LVCs can be transitivized either by the causative of the verb ‘to say’, like in Xamtanga, or by replacing ‘to say’ by a transitive light verb, generally ‘to do/make’, like in the following example from Amharic (Ethio-Semitic):

(12) *kä-Säk’ot’a* *zik’k’* *yi-l-al*
 from-Sekota IDEO 3msg-say-AUX.IPFV[3msg]
 ‘(The place) is a little bit down from Sekota’

(13) *foto-w-in* *zik’k’* *adärräg-ä-w*
 photo-DEF-ACC IDEO do-3msg[PFV]-O3msg
 ‘He lowered the photo (attached to the wall) a little’

Meyer (2009: 36-38) correctly emphasizes that LVCs with ‘to say’ are not systematically intransitive in Amharic. Indeed, ‘to be happy’ (*däss*+SAY) or ‘to have the hiccups’ (*hik’k’*+SAY) occur with an object agreement marker on the light verb.

(14) *hik’k’* *al-ä-w*
 IDEO say-3msg[PFV]-O3sg
 ‘He has the hiccups’

He points out that in such constructions the object agreement marker refers to an experiencer and argues that the affectedness of the subject should be taken into account in a typology of LVCs. I agree with Meyer’s analysis; however, it is not unusual for Amharic verbs to treat experiencers as objects of transitive constructions in general (Creissels, 2004: 10), for instance in *ammämä-w* ‘he is sick’ or *rabä-w* ‘he is hungry’. Furthermore, the fact that only the third person masculine singular agreement marker can appear in the subject position of these verbs shows that there is a clear distinction between transitive LVCs with ‘to say’, which are not governed by an agent, and transitive LVCs with ‘to do’ in Amharic.

⁴ According to Tosco (2000b) and several specialists, South is not a separate branch but a coordinate sub-branch of East Cushitic.

More interesting in Amharic is the use of a distinct light verb to form the causative of LVCs with experiencers. Cohen (1995: 264) noted that *assäññä* ‘to name’ replaces ‘to do’ in this context, hence *däss*+NAME ‘to cause to be happy’, *hik*’k’+NAME ‘to cause to have the hiccups’. My consultants all employed yet another structure for this function, namely the causative of ‘to say’:

- (15) *bizu* *t’illa* *bä-mä-t’ät’t’a-t-u*
 many beer by-INF-drink-INF-POSS3msg
hik’k’ *as-bal-ä-w*
 IDEO CAUS-say-3m.sg[PRF]-O3msg
 ‘The fact that he drank a lot of beer gave him the hiccups’

Some other Ethio-Semitic languages do have more than one light verb for transitive or intransitive LVCs, but my focus in this article is strictly on the process of transitivity. Accordingly, two transitivity patterns are found among languages of the Ethiopian linguistic area: (I) causative of the verb ‘to say’, (II) distinct light verb. Amharic exhibits a mix of both patterns. This may be regarded as a relatively recent development in the language since the use of the causative of ‘to say’ in transitive LVCs is not mentioned in other studies (Kane, 1990: 1094; Leslau, 1995: 580-586). The fact that the speakers I consulted were from Northern Ethiopia (specifically from Wällo, Goğgam and Shäwa) might also have a significant importance: Amharic is a widespread contact language spoken from the North of the country to the heart of the Oromo region in the South, and the existence of a split pattern in this language may be restricted to some dialects.

3.4. Genetic versus areal perspective

The distribution of transitivity patterns of LVCs in some Cushitic languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea is illustrated in Table 4. From a genetic view point, each branch of the family is homogeneous. North and Central Cushitic make use of pattern I, while East Cushitic employs pattern II, with the exception of Gawwada for which I could not find any explanation.

Table 4: Transitive LVCs in some Cushitic languages⁵

		Language	I. Causative of ‘say’	II. Other light verb
NORTH		Beja	<i>sisiyoo-d</i>	
CENTRAL (Agäw)		Bilin	?	
		Xamtanga	<i>š</i> (<i>y-s</i>)	
		Kemant	<i>y-š</i>	
EAST	Lowland	Afar		<i>hay-</i> ‘put/do’
		Oromo ⁶		<i>god-</i> ‘do’
		Somali		<i>sii-</i> ‘give’
		Gawwada	<i>pa-as</i>	
	Highland	Sidamo		<i>ass-</i> ‘do’
		Gedeo		<i>ass-</i> ‘do’
		Libido		? ‘do’
		K’abeena		<i>’a’u-</i> ‘do’
		Kambaata		<i>a’-</i> ‘do’

⁵ Data taken from: Appleyard (2001) for Bilin, Afar, Oromo and Somali; Conti Rossini (1912) for Kemant; Joachim Crass (personal communication) for Libido and K’abeena; Hudson (2007) for Sidamo and Gedeo; Tosco (2006) for Gawwada; Treis (2008) for Kambaata; Vanhove (2007) for Beja; my fieldwork for Xamtanga.

⁶ There is apparently variation among Oromo dialects regarding the transitivity of LVCs. The use of *god-* is at least attested in West Central Oromo (Gragg, 1982; Hayat Omar, personal communication).

Table 5 illustrates the repartition of the two transitive light verb patterns in some Ethio-Semitic languages. The correlation between a type of transitive light verb and the genetic affiliation of a language appears less clear-cut than in Cushitic. While each pattern is associated with a sub-family, Gafat, Kistane and Amharic stand apart from the group they are expected to belong to.

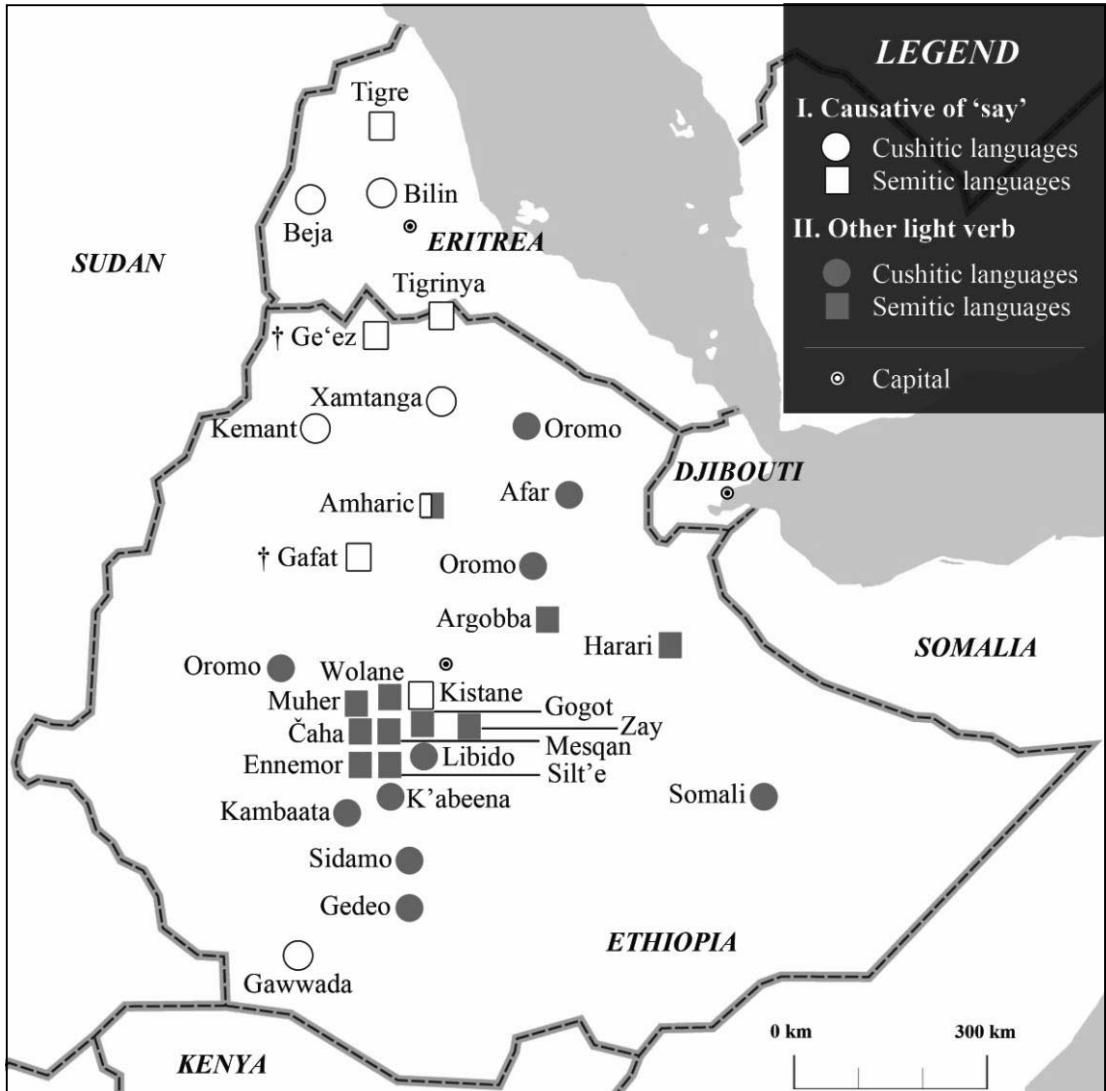
Table 5: Transitive LVCs in some Ethio-Semitic languages⁷

		Language	I. Causative of 'say'	II. Other light verb
NORTH		Ge'ez (†)	' <i>a-bälä</i>	
		Tigre	' <i>a-bala</i>	
		Tigrinya	' <i>a-bbälä</i>	
SOUTH	Transversal	Amharic	<i>as-balä</i>	<i>adärrägä/assänñä</i> 'do/name'
		Argobba		<i>männä</i> 'do'
		Harari		<i>aaša</i> 'do'
		Silt'e		<i>añe</i> 'do'
		Wolane		<i>añne</i> 'do'
		Zay		<i>abän/sano</i> 'do'
		Gafat (†)		<i>a-balä</i>
	Kistane	<i>a-bälä</i>		
	Outer	Mesqan		<i>a(t)bänñä</i>
		Čaha		<i>amänäm</i> 'do'
		Ennemor		<i>epä</i> 'do'
		Muher		<i>abänñäm/amänñäm</i> 'do'
		Gogot		<i>abänñäm</i> 'do'

Another way to account for the distribution of transitive light verbs in Cushitic and in Ethio-Semitic is to address the question from an areal perspective. Two isoglosses emerge from the map below: pattern I in the North and West and pattern II in the South and East.

⁷ Data taken from: Leslau (1952, 1999, 2004) for Tigre, Tigrinya, Argobba, Harari, Silt'e, Wolane, Zay, Gafat, Kistane, Mesqan, Čaha, Ennemor, Muher and Gogot; Hetzron (1972: 18) for Ge'ez; my fieldwork for Amharic. The light verbs 'to do/make' correspond to the roots **bny* and **mny* preceded by the causative *a-* in most South Ethio-Semitic languages. It is this reconstruction that allows us to identify with certainty the type of LV involved, since part of these languages (Mesqan for instance) actually employ a different verb for 'to do' in other contexts than LVCs.

Map: Geographic distribution of the two patterns of transitive LVCs



3.5. Toward the Cushitic origin of LVCs in Ethio-Semitic

Since LVCs are attested in all Ethio-Semitic languages, one can assume that they were introduced in early Ethio-Semitic rather than in each language or language sub-family individually (see Hetzron (1975: 113) and Meyer (2009: 38) for the same conclusion). It implies on the one hand that there is a common Cushitic origin of LVCs in Ethio-Semitic, and on the other hand that variations within Ethio-Semitic are due to later contact at subareal levels.

Based on the transitivity patterns of LVCs, two scenarios of areal diffusion are available. In the first case, the “causative of say” type is the original one in Ethio-Semitic, which means that LVCs were borrowed from Cushitic languages belonging to pattern I. In the second case, early Ethio-Semitic was influenced by languages of pattern II. The first option would appear to be more a solid theory than the second, given the current evidence. An important argument in favor of this is that LVCs of Ge'ez belong to pattern I. There are good reasons not to consider modern Ethio-Semitic languages as direct descendants of Ge'ez, it is nonetheless the oldest attested language of the branch, which has been least exposed to Cushitic influence. Following this hypothesis, Ethio-Semitic languages in the South and the

East, surrounded by East Cushitic, switched to the “other light verb” type. A question that needs to be addressed is why Argobba, Harari, Mesqan, Čaha, and so on, would have come to replace the pattern adopted in early Ethio-Semitic by ‘to do’. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, part of the answer may lie in the fact that some of these languages lack a causative form for the verb ‘to say’; thus from *baräm*, it is impossible to derive **abäräm* in Čaha. To assess the importance of this parameter would require some systematic investigation of the phenomenon in South Ethio-Semitic. An additional consideration that should be taken into account regarding this switch is that ‘to do’ is a typologically much more frequent light verb than ‘to say’ in transitive LVCs. Turning to the case of Kistane, which is currently located in the South, the use of pattern I can be explained by its close affiliation to Gafat (Hetzron, 1977). As Gafat used to be spoken more to the Northeast, it is possible to assume that Kistane was not originally found where it is attested nowadays (see Goldenberg, 1968 for discussion).

Finally, note that Leslau (1952: 79) implicitly postulated a similar scenario when he described the causative of the verb ‘to say’ in transitive LVC as “a normal procedure in Ethiopic [i.e. Ethio-Semitic]” and proposed to ascribe the use of a light verb ‘to do/make’ in other languages to contact with Sidamo (Highland East Cushitic). Accordingly, the Agäw language cluster would appear as the best candidate for the introduction of LVCs in early Ethio-Semitic.

4. Conclusion

This paper began with the analysis of LVCs in Xamtanga. I have shown that the language uses types of lexical bases similar to those found in other Ethiopian languages, and that the light verb of transitive constructions *š-* is probably a frozen form of the causative of ‘to say’. The second part considered LVCs as a feature of the Ethiopian linguistic area that Ethio-Semitic borrowed from Cushitic. Based on previous studies, I have argued that transitivity is a relevant criterion to establish a classification of these constructions. The conclusion reached is that Northern Agäw is likely to have played a significant role in the areal diffusion of LVCs. Minimally, this cluster had an influence at a sub-areal level, on Ethio-Semitic languages spoken in the North (Ge‘ez, Tigre, Tigrinya, Amharic, Gafat and Kistane). Nevertheless, my data suggest that Northern Agäw is possibly the source of LVCs in the entire branch, a hypothesis that would confirm the importance of Agäw as part of the main Cushitic substrate of early Ethio-Semitic.

Abbreviations

ABL	Ablative	INT	Interrogative
ACC	Accusative	m	Masculine
ALL	Allative	MEDP	Mediopassive
AUX	Auxiliary	MVM	Main verb marker
CAUS	Causative	NEG	Negation
CNV	Converb	NMLZ	Nominalizer
COP	Copula	O	Object agreement marker
DEF	Definite article	OBL	Oblique
DAT	Dative	PART	Participle
f	Feminine	PFV	Perfective
GEN	Genitive	POSD	Possessed
IDEO	Ideophone	POSS	Possessive
IPFV	Imperfective	sg	Singular
INF	Infinitive		

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