

## Definiteness and Agreement in the Amharic Complex Noun Phrase

**1** Amharic (Ethio-Semitic) noun phrases featuring a possessor, a relative clause and/or an attributive modifier (collectively referred to hereinafter as ‘complex noun phrases’) pose a variety of morphosyntactic challenges in the domain of definiteness and gender agreement, and also with respect to the placement and distribution of the prefix *yä-*, a meaningless marker specific to possessed and relativized noun phrases. This paper disentangles the complex empirical generalizations (many of which have not been uncovered in full detail in the extant literature; cf. Fulass 1972, Demeke 2001, *i.a.*) and provides an in-depth analysis of the syntax of the Amharic complex noun phrase from the point of view of the minimalist theory of locality and Agree.

**2** Amharic possessors and relative clauses are obligatorily marked with the prefix *yä-* (cf. (1)–(2)); like definiteness marking (*-u/w* in (1/2)), this morpheme is attached to the syntactic head of the possessor/relative clause. It does not originate as a subconstituent of the possessor/relative clause: *yä-* functions as a LINKER of the possessor/relative clause and its ‘head’, serving the same purpose as English *of*. LINKERS are introduced in the syntactic structure as a result of the application of Predicate Inversion — a movement operation by which a predicate raises across its subject into a higher A–position (Den Dikken 1995, to appear). Such movement is contingent on domain-extending movement of the small-clause functional head to a higher functional head (F in (3)); F is spelled out as the LINKER, *yä-* in Amharic. Like genetically unrelated Mandarin and Persian, and fellow-Semitic Lebanese Arabic, Amharic obligatorily applies Predicate Inversion to noun-phrase internal possessors and relative clauses, giving rise to the obligatory emergence of the LINKER, *yä-*.

**3** The LINKER *yä-* ends up attached to the *syntactic head* of the inverted predicate as a result of *head movement* of the syntactic head of the constituent in SpecFP up to the D–head of the complex noun phrase: *yä-* gloms on to the head raised to D by itself head-moving from F to D, and left-adjoining (in keeping with antisymmetry) to the syntactic head of the possessor/relative clause (cf. (4)). For unmodified possessors (1a), this syntactic head is the noun itself; for adjectivally modified possessors (5a), the syntactic head is the adjective, which (as the closest available goal) head-moves to the highest head in the extended projection of the possessor, and from there onward to the outer D–head. If the adjectival modifier of the possessor is itself degree-modified (by *bät’am* ‘very’; (5b,c)), head movement of the adjective is impossible: degree modifiers block head movement (cf. Dutch *dat Jan de deur <\*erg> wil <\*erg> rood verven* ‘that Jan the door <very> wants <very> red paint’, where incorporation of *rood* ‘red’ into the verbal cluster prohibits degree modification). Since Amharic degree modifiers themselves cannot head-move either, the only way of raising a physical head from the possessor up to the outer D–head is by last-resort insertion of a demonstrative (*izzia*) in the possessor’s D (thus precluding DEF–marking), which then raises to the outer D and hosts the LINKER *yä-* (cf. (5c)). When the degree-modified AP modifies the *head* of the noun phrase (cf. (6)), no last-resort demonstrative insertion is called for because no head movement to D obtains; the entire degree-modified AP may then A’–move to SpecDP, with DEF–marking on the adjective, the head of the complex AP.

**4** In relativized noun phrases, the inverted predicate in SpecFP in (3) is the relative clause (CP); the C–head of the relative clause is occupied by the *finite verb* of the relative clause, which raises to C via overt-syntactic head movement (7). Thus, Amharic (though SOV) shares with the rest of Semitic (VSO) the fact that the finite verb raises to C; its surface SOV order is the result of subsequent movement of the remnant IP (which is irrelevant here; remnant–IP movement arguably takes place in interrogative CPs as well: Demeke 2003). By raising overtly to the C of the relative clause and onward to the D–head of the complex noun phrase, the finite verb of the relative clause comes to host both the definiteness marking for the complex noun phrase (harbored by D) and the LINKER *yä-*, which raises up to the outer D and left-adjoins to the finite verb.

**5** The DEF–marker on the finite verb of the relative clause generally shows *default* (3SM) gender (cf. (8a)) as a consequence of the fact that there is nothing with which the DEF–marker in the outer D–head can establish an Agree relationship: (a) by the time V<sub>fin</sub> gets to D, it has already been stripped of all its uninterpretable  $\phi$ -features; (b) CP in SpecFP has no  $\phi$ -features; and (c) D cannot Agree with the ‘head’ in the small-clause subject position in (7) because it is embedded in the domain of the FP phase. In possessed noun phrases, by contrast, DEF will agree with the possessor: it is the possessor’s own D that DEF is harbored by. The outer D–head of possessed noun phrases whose possessor is definite generally harbors no DEF of its own: (1a) is normally interpreted as outwardly *indefinite*, which follows from the fact that the outer D’s [+definite] specification would have no unvalued matching feature to Agree with. But when the possessum

is adorned with a DEF-marked adjectival modifier (cf. (9b)), the complex possessed noun phrase becomes outwardly definite: the outer D must Agree with the unvalued DEF-marker on AP and check its [+definite] specification accordingly. By establishing an Agree relationship with AP for definiteness, the outer D-head may in principle establish an Agree relationship with AP for *gender* as well, thereby enabling the DEF-marker on the finite verb of the relative clause to engage in gender agreement with the head noun: with the outer D checking the DEF-marker on the finite verb and gender-agreeing with the adjective, and with A in turn (straightforwardly) gender-agreeing with the head, a derived gender-agreement relationship results between the finite verb's DEF-marker and the head. This explains the fact (cf. (8b,c)) that under the influence of a DEF-marked adjective that gender-agrees with the head, the otherwise ungendered DEF-marker on the finite verb of the relative clause may come to gender-agree with the head, by piggy-backing on other relationships.

**6** Compound-tense object relatives featuring the past-tense auxiliary *näbbär* (cf. (10)) present a final quirk: though the participial main verb agrees with the subject of the relative, the subject marker on *näbbär* agrees with the *head* of the relative clause (Fulass 1972). This can be likened to what we find in relative clauses in some varieties of English (*the people who Clark think are in the garden*; Kimball & Aissen 1971), which Kayne (1989) analyzes as agreement between AgrS, covertly raised to C, and *who* in SpecCP. For Amharic we had concluded that the finite verb of the relative clause raises overtly to C (cf. (7)); an extension of Kayne's account to 'head agreement' in (10) is thus straightforward once a null operator is postulated in Amharic relatives (for which independent support from obligatory object marking will be given).

## Examples

- (1) a. *yä-lijj-u* bet  
YÄ-boy-DEF house  
'a house of the boy'
- b. *y-and* lijj bet  
YÄ-one/a boy house  
'a house of a boy'
- (2) a. *anbäsa yä-gäddäl-ä-w* lijj  
lion YÄ-killed-3MS.SU-DEF boy  
'the boy who killed a lion'
- b. *anbäsa yä-gäddäl-ä* lijj  
lion YÄ-killed-3MS.SU boy  
'a boy who killed a lion'
- (3)  $[_{FP} [_{Pred} YP \text{ (Amharic: YP=POSS'OR/RELATIVE CL)}]_j [_{F'} F+X_i [_{XP=SC} [_{Subj} (...)\ NP] [_{X'} t_i t_j]]]]$
- (4)  $[_{DP} D [_{FP} [_{Pred} Y \dots]_j [_{F'} F(=y\ddot{a}-)+X_i [_{XP=SC} [_{Subj} (...)\ NP] [_{X'} t_i t_j]]]]]$
- (5) a. *yä-tillik'-u* lijj däbtär  
YÄ-big-DEF boy notebook 'the big boy's notebook, the notebook of the big boy'
- b. <sup>??</sup>*yä-bät'am* tillik'-u lijj däbtär / \**yä-bät'am-u* ...  
YÄ-very big-DEF boy notebook YÄ-very-DEF ...
- c. *yä-zzia* bät'am tillik' lijj däbtär  
YÄ-DEM very big boy notebook 'the/that very big boy's notebook'
- (6) *<bät'am* tillik'-\*(u)> *yä-lijj-u* <bät'am tillik'(-u)> däbtär  
very big-\*(DEF) YÄ-boy-DEF very big(-DEF) notebook  
'the boy's very big notebook'
- (7)  $[_{DP} [_{D} [_{C} y\ddot{a}-_k [_{Vfin}]_j] [_{D} DEF]]] [_{FP} [_{CP} t_j [_{IP} \dots]]_i [_{F'} t_k [_{SC} NP t_i]]]]]$
- (8) a. *anbäsa-wa-n* *yä-gäddäl-äčč-{\u{iw}/\*\u{iwa}}* lijjit  
lion-DEF.F-ACC YÄ-killed-3SF.SU-{\DEF.3SM/DEF.3SF} girl
- b. *anbäsa-wa-n* *yä-gäddäl-äčč-{\u{iw}/\*\u{iwa}}* *wäfram-{\u{\*u/wa}}* lijjit  
lion-DEF.F-ACC YÄ-killed-3SF.SU-{\DEF.3SM/DEF.3SF} fat-{\DEF.3SM/DEF.3SF} girl
- c. *wäfram-{\u{\*u/wa}}* *anbäsa-wa-n* *yä-gäddäl-äčč-{\u{iw}/\*\u{iwa}}* lijjit  
fat-{\DEF.3SM/DEF.3SF} lion-DEF.F-ACC YÄ-killed-3SF.SU-{\DEF.3SM/DEF.3SF} girl  
'the (fat) girl who killed the lioness'
- (9) a. *yä-lijj-u* tillik' bet  
YÄ-boy-DEF big house  
'a big house of the boy'
- b. *yä-lijj-u* tillik'-u bet  
YÄ-boy-DEF big-DEF house  
'the big house of the boy'
- (10) *lijj-u* *gädl-o-wat* *yä-näbbär-{\äčč/\*ä}-iw* lam  
boy-DEF killed-3SM.SU-3SF.OB YÄ-PAST-{\3SF.SU/3SM.SU}-DEF.3SM cow  
'the cow that the boy had killed'