

# Language Sketch: Amharic

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# 1 Overview

This grammar sketch describes the Amharic language of Ethiopia. Amharic is a Semitic language which is related to Arabic and Hebrew. It is mainly spoken in the Amhara region of Ethiopia and Addis Ababa, the capital. It has 25,600,000 speakers in Ethiopia, of which 21,600,000 are L1 users.<sup>1</sup>

The language has a basic SOV word order, as shown in (1).

- (1) *(iné) temarí neny*  
I student be\1s  
'I am a student'

Amharic is also a pro-drop language, and the pronoun *iné* could be omitted from this sentence. Verbs agree with the person and number of the subject (and object in transitive verbs). All types of phrases are head-final, and the language features postpositions like in (2).

- (2) *iné demena-w lay neber-kuwin*  
I cloud-DEF.ACC on be\PAST-1s  
'I was on the cloud'

Arguments are tracked through agreement, which is discussed in Section 8. However, the accusative case is marked in definite nouns, as can be seen in (2) with the suffix *-n*.

All data for this sketch were obtained through elicitation sessions with Arsema Solomon. Arsema was born in Addis Ababa but grew up in the United States. She continued to speak only Amharic at home and lived in an Ethiopian community in Washington, D.C. Arsema is not literate in Amharic script.

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<sup>1</sup>This information was retrieved from: Simons, Gary F. and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2017. Ethnologue: *Languages of the World, Twentieth edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.

## 2 Phonology

Amharic has several interesting phonological features, including a three-way contrast for stops: voiced, voiceless, and ejective. This distinction also exists for affricates, and the syllable structure of the language allows for quite heavy syllables (at least CVCC).

### 2.1 Consonant Phonemes

Table 1 shows the consonant phonemes in Amharic.

Table 1: Consonant Phonemes							
	Bilabial	Labiodent.	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b p'		t d t'			k g k'	ʔ
Nasal	m		n		ɲ		
Trill			r				
Fricative		f	s z	ʃ			h
Approximant					j		
Lat. approx.			l				
Other sounds: w (labio-velar approximant)							
Affricates: tʃ, tʃ', ts', dʒ							

The plosives in Amharic are /p p' b t t' d k k' g ʔ/. There is a three-way contrast for labial stops (voiced, voiceless, and ejective). All sounds occur word-initially, as can be seen in (1).

- (1) /pasti/ 'pastry'  
 /bado/ 'empty'  
 /p'ap'as/ 'pope'

The ejective /p'/ is rare in Amharic, but the alveolar and velar ejectives /t' k'/ are quite common. Alveolar and velar stops have a three-way contrast between voiced, voiceless, and ejective variants. These can be seen in (2) and (3).

- (2) /tako/ 'high heel'  
 /t'abja/ 'station'  
 /dar/ 'edge'
- (3) /kibrit/ 'lighter'  
 /k'oda/ 'skin'  
 /gabja/ 'blanket'

The glottal stop was not observed word-initially, but it does occur word-medially. It is not clear whether it is a phoneme in the language; there are no close minimal pairs, and it is often deleted.

- (4) /gaʔat/ 'large bite'  
 /ga:t/ 'large bite (said quickly)'

Amharic has at least two nasal consonant phonemes. /m/ and /n/ occur word-initially, as in (5). The palatal nasal only occurs word-medially and word-finally.

- (5) /mɪlas/ 'tongue'  
 /nɪfas/ 'wind'

- (6) /amariɲa/ ‘Amharic’

In the rest of the paper, the palatal nasal is represented with <ɲj>.

There is one trill in the language, /r/, which has a good minimal pair with /g/ in (7). We also see a word-initial example in (8).

- (7) /bɛr/ ‘door’  
       /bɛg/ ‘lamb’  
 (8) /rɛɕim/ ‘tall’

There are five fricative phonemes in Amharic, /f s z ʃ h/. All of these occur word-initially, as seen in (8).

- (9) /fɛɾɛs/ ‘horse’  
 (10) /samba/ ‘lung’  
 (11) /zimb/ ‘fly’  
 (12) /ʃuka/ ‘fork’  
 (13) /hod/ ‘belly’

Additionally, there are four affricates in the language, including a voiced, voiceless, and ejective variant of /tʃ/. There were no word-initial examples of the non-ejective /tʃ/, so it may not be a phoneme in the language.

- (14) /tʃʼɛɾɛkʼɑ/ ‘moon’  
 (15) /tsʼɛhqj/ ‘sun’  
 (16) /ɕoro/ ‘ear’  
 (17) /ainotʃu/ ‘eyes’

Approximants in Amharic include /l/, /j/, and /w/, which all occur word-initially.

- (18) /ləlit/ ‘night’  
       /jimari/ ‘bless you’  
       /wɛf/ ‘bird’

/w/ also occurs as part of the diphthong /aw/.

## 2.2 Vowel Phonemes

Table 2 shows the vowel phonemes in Amharic.

Table 2: Vowel Phonemes

i	ɪ	u
e	ɛ	o
		ɑ

Diphthongs: ej, aj, ɛw, aw

The front and mid high vowels /i/ and /ɪ/ occur word-initially and word-finally in (15) and (16), but the back vowel /u/ does not occur word-initially (and is shown word-finally

in (15). However, the morpheme /-u/ is a definite marker in the language, so /u/ we have reason to suspect that it is a phoneme.

- (19) /iju/ ‘look at it’  
/pasti/ ‘pastry’

- (20) /ibet/ ‘house’  
/jimari/ ‘bless you’

Mid vowels in Amharic include /e/, /ɛ/, and /o/. All occur word-initially and word-finally, as seen in (17), (18), and (19).

- (21) /eli/ ‘turtle’  
/ajne/ ‘my eye’

- (22) /ɛrɛ/ ‘really?’

- (23) /oromija/ ‘language of Oromo people’  
/doro/ ‘chicken’

The only low vowel is /a/, which occurs word-initially and word-finally.

- (24) /asa/ ‘fish’

Amharic has four diphthongs, /aj ej ɛw aw/. /ɛw/ does not occur word-initially, so it may not be a phoneme. In some cases, these may be better analyzed as a vowel and a consonant.

- (25) /ajt/ ‘mouse’

- (26) /k’ej/ ‘red’

- (27) /jesatfɛw/ ‘their (formal)’

- (28) /bɛlaw/ ‘I ate’

## 2.3 Syllables

There are several different syllable types in Amharic.

- (29) (V) /eli/ ‘turtle’

- (30) (CV) /milas/ ‘tongue’

- (31) (CVC) /wɛf/ ‘bird’

- (32) (CVCC) /wɛrk/ ‘gold’

- (33) (CCV) /arɪŋgwade/ ‘green’

In general, we see CCV syllables only with glides as the second consonant. As in (25), (CVCC) syllables are also possible. So, we may propose a general template for syllable structure that looks like (C)(G)V(C)(C), where G is a glide. However, we see no CGVCC syllables, so there may be a limit to how many consonants are in a syllable.

## 2.4 Orthography

The following orthography was created for easier transcription of Amharic and is used in the rest of the paper.

Table 3: Vowels		
<i>í</i> [i]	<i>ī</i> [ī]	<i>u</i> [u]
<i>é</i> [e]		<i>o</i> [o]
<i>e</i> [ɛ]		<i>a</i> [a]

Consonants remain largely the same as their IPA equivalents, with the exception of the affricates.

Table 4: Consonants						
Bilabial	Labiodental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
p b		t t' d			k k' g	'[ʔ]
m		n				
		r				
	f	s z	sh[j]			h
				y[j]		
		l				
Other sounds: w (labio-velar approximant)						
Affricates: ch[tʃ], ch'[tʃ'], ts', j[ɕ]						

### 3 Pronouns

There are eight different subject pronouns in Amharic. There are forms for first person, second person, and third person singular and plural as well as a gender distinction in the second and third person. These pronouns are listed in table 5.

Table 5: Subject pronouns

1S	<i>iné</i>	I
2M	<i>ante</i>	you (m)
2F	<i>anchí</i>	you (f)
3M	<i>isu</i>	he
3F	<i>iswa</i>	she
1P	<i>inya</i>	we
2P	<i>inante</i>	you (pl)
3P	<i>inesu</i>	they

These pronouns only occur as the subjects of sentences, and they occur before objects and verbs. This provides some evidence that Amharic is an SOV language.

- (1) *iné rejim neny*  
I tall be\1S  
'I am tall.'
- (2) *ante rejim neh*  
you-M tall be\2MS  
'You (m) are tall'
- (3) *anchí rejim nesh*  
you-F tall be\2FS  
'You (f) are tall'
- (4) *isu rejim new*  
he tall be\3MS  
'He is tall'
- (5) *iswa rejim nat*  
she tall be\3FS  
'She is tall'
- (6) *inya rejim nen*  
we tall be\1P  
'We are tall'
- (7) *inante rejim nachu*  
you\P tall be\2P  
'You (pl) are tall'
- (8) *inesu rejim nachew*  
they tall be\3P



‘They are tall’

Additionally, the language has demonstrative pronouns (like ‘this’ and ‘that’). These pronouns are gendered, and the form of the copula agrees with the gender of the pronoun. In (9), we see that the verb *new* ‘to be’ is in the masculine form, which agrees with the masculine demonstrative pronoun *ihé* ‘this’. In (10), *nat*, the third person feminine form of the copula, agrees with the feminine demonstrative pronoun *ichí* ‘this’.

- (9) *ihé k’ey wef new*  
this red bird be\3M  
‘This is a red bird’<sup>2</sup>
- (10) *ichí gwadenya-ye nat*  
this friend-1S.POSS be\3F  
‘This is my (female) friend.’
- (11) *inezí k’ey wef-och nachew*  
these red bird-P be\3P  
‘These are red birds’

By changing the word order, these can also be used as determiners as in (12).

- (12) *inezí wef-och k’ey nachew*  
these bird-P red be\3P  
‘These birds are red’

There is evidence of possessive pronouns, but we only see a single example in the data.

- (13) *yené* ‘mine’

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<sup>2</sup>In these glosses, 3F means third person feminine singular, 3P means third person plural, etc.

## 4 Possession

There are two different strategies for possession in Amharic, both of which are used for alienable and inalienable possession.

### 4.1 Suffixes

In this pattern, the person and number of the possessor is shown by a suffix on the possessed noun. Second and third person singular suffixes distinguish between male and female, but the plural forms are not gendered.

- (1) *doro-é* ‘my chicken’  
*doro-i* ‘your (m) chicken’  
*doro-ish* ‘your (f) chicken’  
*doro-u* ‘his chicken’  
*doro-wa* ‘her chicken’

The second person masculine suffix also occurs as *-ih*.

- (2) *ij-ih* ‘your (m) hand’

All plural suffixes begin with *ach-*. These suffixes may be further analyzable as *-ach-in*, *-ach-un*, and *-ach-ew*.

- (3) *doro-achin* ‘our chicken’  
*doro-achun* ‘your (pl) chicken’  
*doro-achew* ‘their chicken’

### 4.2 Contrast forms

Additionally, Amharic has several contrast forms for possession. These forms place the emphasis on the possessor and convey a meaning like ‘MY hand.’ Each of these can also be expressed with a suffix form (without emphasis) as in the previous section. These are formed using the prefix *ye-* before a pronoun (as listed in table 5).

Table 6: Contrast forms			
<i>ye-né ij</i>	‘my hand’	<i>ij-é</i>	‘my hand’
<i>y-ante ij</i>	‘your (m) hand’	<i>ij-ih</i>	‘your (m) hand’
<i>y-anchí ij</i>	‘your (f) hand’	<i>ij-ish</i>	‘your (f) hand’
<i>ye-su ij</i>	‘his hand’	<i>ij-u</i>	‘his hand’
<i>ye-swa ij</i>	‘her hand’	<i>ij-wa</i>	‘her hand’
<i>ye-nya ij-och</i>	‘our hands’	<i>ij-och-achin</i>	‘our hands’
<i>?ye-nante ij-och<sup>3</sup></i>	‘your (pl) hands’	<i>ij-och-achun</i>	‘your (pl) hands’
<i>ye-nesu ij-och</i>	‘their hands’	<i>ij-och-achew</i>	‘their hands’

Possessive forms like ‘Rachel’s hand’ are constructed similarly. As shown in (5), these constructions do not work with the suffix forms in the previous section.

<sup>3</sup>This form was never elicited, but we did see *yenante mets’af* ‘your (pl) book’.

- (4) *ye Rachel ij* ‘Rachel’s hand’
- (5) *\*Rachel ijwa* ‘Rachel’s hand’
- (6) *ye Abe ij* ‘Abe’s hand’

We can see in (4) and (6) that these forms are the same for male and female.

## 5 Reflexives

Reflexives are formed with the noun *iras*, which may be derived from *ras* ‘head.’ *iras* is the object of the sentence and takes a possessive suffix and a *-n/-ny* object agreement suffix. In (1), we see the paradigm for the past tense of the verb *metat’eb* ‘to wash.’

- (1) *metat’eb* ‘to wash’
- |                     |                     |                             |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>iras-é-ny</i>    | <i>tat’eb-kuwin</i> | ‘I washed myself’           |
| <i>iras-i-n</i>     | <i>tat’eb-k</i>     | ‘You (m) washed yourself’   |
| <i>iras-ish-in</i>  | <i>tat’eb-sh</i>    | ‘You (f) washed yourself’   |
| <i>iras-u-n</i>     | <i>tat’eb-e</i>     | ‘He washed himself’         |
| <i>iras-wa-n</i>    | <i>tat’eb-ech</i>   | ‘She washed herself’        |
| <i>iras-achin</i>   | <i>tat’eb-en</i>    | ‘We washed ourselves’       |
| <i>iras-achun</i>   | <i>tat’eb-achu</i>  | ‘You all washed yourselves’ |
| <i>iras-achew-n</i> | <i>tat’eb-u</i>     | ‘They washed themselves’    |

Each of these forms of *iras* has an added *-n/-ny/-in* object suffix unless the possessive suffix already ends in *n*<sup>4</sup>. The *-ny* form occurs after the tense *-é* suffix in the 1S form, and the *-in* form occurs after *-ish*. This may be a result of the cluster *\*ishn* not being allowed in the language. (2) and (3) show the glosses of two of the forms.

- (2) *iras-é-ny*                      *tat’eb-kuwin*  
 REFL-1S.POSS-ACC wash-1S  
 ‘I washed myself’
- (3) *iras-i-n*                      *tat’eb-k*  
 REFL-2M.POSS-ACC wash-2M  
 ‘You (m) washed yourself’

Reciprocals have a very similar paradigm. They use a different verbal suffix, *te-* and a different verb root (above, *tat’eb*, and here, *tat’ib*).

- (4) *iras-achin te-tat’ib-en* ‘We washed each other’
- (5) *iras-achun te-tat’ib-achu* ‘You (pl) washed each other’
- (6) *iras-achew-n te-tat’ib-u* ‘They washed each other’

The verb form for reflexives and reciprocals is as we expect from section 8.1 on subject person marking. It agrees with the subject of the sentence, which either occurs before the object or only as a verbal suffix (as seen here). However, we don’t see any object agreement.

In the present tense, we see the following paradigm in (7):

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<sup>4</sup>This is probably the accusative definite suffix that occurs throughout the language, but it would require some more data to prove.

- (7) *metat'eb* 'to wash'
- |                     |                                |                           |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>iras-é-ny</i>    | <i>i-tat'ib-ale-w</i>          | 'I wash myself'           |
| <i>iras-i-n</i>     | <i>ti-tat'ib-ale-h</i>         | 'You (m) wash yourself'   |
| <i>iras-ish-in</i>  | <i>ti-tat'ib-yal-ish</i>       | 'You (f) wash yourself'   |
| <i>iras-u-n</i>     | <i>ti-tat'ib-e<sup>5</sup></i> | 'He washes himself'       |
| <i>iras-wa-n</i>    | <i>ti-tat'ib-ale-ch</i>        | 'She washes herself'      |
| <i>iras-achin</i>   | <i>ini-tat'ib-ale-n</i>        | 'We wash ourselves'       |
| <i>iras-achun</i>   | <i>ti-tat'ib-ala-chu</i>       | 'You all wash yourselves' |
| <i>iras-achew-n</i> | <i>yí-tat'ib-al-u</i>          | 'They wash themselves'    |

Two of these are glossed in (8) and (9).

- (8) *iras-é-ny*                      *i-tat'ib-ale-w*  
REFL-1S.POSS-ACC G1-wash-PRES-1S  
'I wash myself'
- (9) *iras-i-n*                      *ti-tat'ib-ale-h*  
REFL-2M.POSS-ACC G2-wash-PRES-2M  
'I wash myself'

As in the past tense, a form of *iras-* is followed by a verb in the present tense. This verb agrees with the person and number of the subject as we would expect according to the present tense verb paradigm in Section 8.

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<sup>5</sup>Based on the present tense verb paradigm in Section 8, we would expect *yí-tat'ib-ale*. This may need to be re-elicited from the speaker.

## 6 Commands

There are four different command forms in Amharic for male, female, and plural recipients in addition to the hortative form. These forms agree with the recipient using a verbal suffix in the male, female, and plural forms, and a prefix in the hortative form.

### 6.1 Command affixes

The different command forms are encoded through affixes which are attached to the verb root. In the case of vowel-final verb roots, the final vowel is dropped when there is a suffix (as in (2)). In consonant-final verb roots, there is no suffix in the masculine imperative form, and the verb form consists of only the verb root. This can be seen in (5). The hortative forms in (4) and (8) consist of a verbal prefix *in-* or *ini-* which is attached to the verb root.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>(1) <i>téñ-a-∅</i><br/>sleep-2M.IMP<br/>‘sleep! (to a man)’</p> | <p>(5) <i>ambib-∅</i><br/>read-2M.IMP<br/>‘read! (to a man)’</p>   |
| <p>(2) <i>téñ-í</i><br/>sleep-2F.IMP<br/>‘sleep! (to a woman)’</p> | <p>(6) <i>ambib-í</i><br/>read-2F.IMP<br/>‘read! (to a woman)’</p> |
| <p>(3) <i>téñ-u</i><br/>sleep-2P.IMP<br/>‘sleep! (pl)’</p>         | <p>(7) <i>ambib-u</i><br/>read-2P.IMP<br/>‘read! (pl)’</p>         |
| <p>(4) <i>ini-téñ-a</i><br/>sleep-2H.IMP<br/>‘let’s sleep!’</p>    | <p>(8) <i>in-ambib</i><br/>read-2H.IMP<br/>‘let’s read’</p>        |

These forms are negated using the prefix *at-* in the masculine, feminine, and plural forms. This can be seen for the verb *met’saf* ‘to write’ in (9), (10), and (11). In the hortative form, the prefix *an-* is used in the negative form instead of *in-*.

- (9) *at-its’af-∅*  
NEG-write-2M.IMP  
‘don’t write! (to a man)’
- (10) *at-its’af-í*  
NEG-write-2F.IMP  
‘don’t write! (to a woman)’
- (11) *at-its’af-u*  
NEG-write-2P.IMP  
‘don’t write! (pl)’
- (12) *an-its’af*  
2H.IMP.NEG-write  
‘let’s not write’

These forms are summarized in table 7.

Table 7: Command affixes		
form	positive	negative
2M	- $\emptyset$	<i>at-</i> , - $\emptyset$
2F	- <i>í</i>	<i>at-</i> , - <i>í</i>
2P	- <i>u</i>	<i>at-</i> , - <i>u</i>
2H	<i>in-</i> / <i>- V</i> , <i>ini-</i> / <i>-C</i>	<i>an-</i>

## 6.2 Phonological changes

In addition to the affixes, the root vowel changes for some verbs in the imperative form. Examples of this include *merot* ‘to run’ and *mehéd* ‘to go’, which are shown in (13) and (14).

- (13) *merot* ‘to run’  $\rightarrow$  *rut* ‘run! (to a male)’
- (14) *mehéd* ‘to go’  $\rightarrow$  *híd* ‘go! (to a male)’
- (15) *mets’af* ‘to write’  $\rightarrow$  *ts’af* ‘write! (to a male)’

This process occurs in one-syllable verb roots. We can put together the following correspondences in (16):

- (16) 1.  $\acute{e} \rightarrow \acute{i}$
- 2.  $o \rightarrow u$
- 3.  $a \rightarrow a$  (no change)

In the case of / $\acute{e}$ / and / $o$ /, these vowels are being raised, but we do not see a similar process with / $a$ / as seen in (15).

In the feminine forms of many commands, the consonant before the /- $\acute{i}$ / suffix becomes palatalized. This can be seen in 17 and 18, and appears to only occur with / $t$ / and / $d$ /.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (17) <i>t’ech’-í</i><br>drink-2F.IMP<br>‘drink! (to a female)’ | (18) <i>híj-í</i><br>go-2F.IMP<br>‘go! (to a female)’ |
|--|---|

This can be captured with the following phonological rule. This does not appear to be a general rule in the language and may be specific to commands.

- (19) voiceless stop  $\rightarrow$  palatalized /  $- \acute{i}$

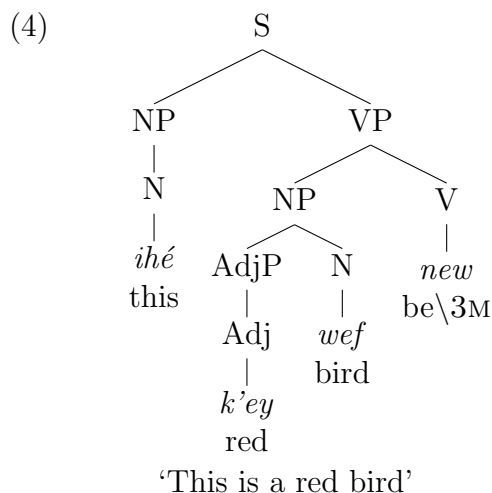
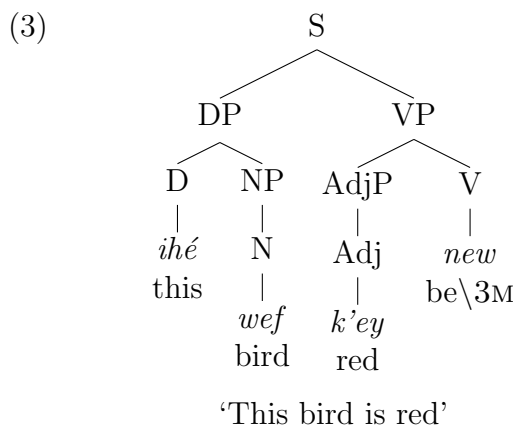
## 7 Copular sentences

### 7.1 Structure

The ‘be’ element is the verb *new* (here in the masculine form; all forms can be seen in table 8). Copular sentences have the form SOV. The complements in each of these sentences can be phrases headed either by nouns, the class of words that includes things, or by adjectives, the class of words that are used to modify nouns. These two possibilities are shown in (1) and (2).

- (1) *wef-och tinishíyé nachew*  
 bird-P small be\3P  
 ‘The birds are small’<sup>6</sup>
- (2) *Arsema temarí nech*  
 Arsema student be\3F  
 Arsema is a student

The difference between these phrases is sometimes dependent on word order. In (3), *k’ey* ‘red’ is a complement of the verb. In (4), it modifies the noun phrase, which is a complement of the *new*.



The forms of the subjects and complements are the same. Amharic appears to track arguments using word order, and there are no indications of case in copular sentences.

### 7.2 Copula forms

Table 8 lists the forms of the copula in the postive and negative. Interestingly, the forms of ‘to be’ (possibly with the root *ne*) match the suffixes for object prefixes, which can be seen in section 8.2. It may be possible to analyze these as *ne-ny*, *ne-h*, etc.

<sup>6</sup>In these glosses, 3F means third person singular feminine, P means plural, etc.



Table 8: Copula forms

form	affirmative		negative	
1S	<i>neny</i>	‘I am’	<i>ay-dele-hu-m</i>	‘I am not’
2M	<i>neh</i>	‘You (m) are’	<i>ay-dele-h-im</i>	‘You (m) are not’
2F	<i>nesh</i>	‘You (f) are’	<i>ay-dele-sh-im</i>	‘You (f) are not’
3M	<i>new</i>	‘He is’	<i>ay-dele-m</i>	‘He is not’
3F	<i>nech/n-at</i>	‘She is’	<i>ay-dele-ch-im</i>	‘She is not’
1P	<i>nen</i>	‘We are’	<i>ay-dele-n-im</i>	‘We are not’
2P	<i>nachu</i>	‘You (pl) are’	<i>ay-del-achu-m</i>	‘You (pl) are not’
3P	<i>nachew</i>	‘They are’	<i>ay-del-u-m</i>	‘They are not’

The negative forms of the copula are similar to the negation paradigm presented in section 8.1. They are formed by a prefix *ay-* on the negative copula *dele* with the negation suffix *-im*. These may be glossed like in (5).

- (5) *ay-dele-h-im*  
 NEG-be-2M-NEG  
 ‘You (m) are not’

The word order is SOV in both the positive and negative. The only difference between affirmative and negative is the form of the copula.

- (6) *iné temarí neny* ‘I am a student’  
 (7) *ante temarí neh* ‘You (m) are a student’  
 (8) *anchí temarí nesh* ‘You (f) are a student’  
 (9) *isu temarí new* ‘He is a student’  
 (10) *iswa temarí nech* ‘She is a student’  
 (11) *inya temaríyoch nen* ‘We are students’  
 (12) *inante temaríyoch nachu* ‘You (pl) are students’  
 (13) *inesu temaríyoch nachew* ‘They are students’  
 (14) *iné temarí aydelehum* ‘I am not a student’  
 (15) *ante temarí aydelehim* ‘You (m) are not a student’  
 (16) *anchí temarí aydeleshim* ‘You (f) are not a student’  
 (17) *isu temarí aydelem* ‘He is not a student’  
 (18) *iswa temarí aydelechim* ‘She is not a student’  
 (19) *inya temaríyoch aydelenim* ‘We are not students’  
 (20) *inante temaríyoch aydelachum* ‘You (p) are not students’  
 (21) *inesu temaríyoch aydelum* ‘They are not students’

## 8 Verbs

Maybe an overview here?

### 8.1 Subject person marking

In Amharic, subject person marking differs in each tense.

#### 8.1.1 Past positive, negative

In the past tense, there are different affixes depending on whether the verb root ends in a consonant or a vowel. Example (1) lists the different forms for a verb ending in a consonant.

- |     |                                       |   |
|-----|---------------------------------------|---|
| (1) | <i>mezemir</i> ‘to sing’              |   |
|     | <i>zemer-ku</i> <sup>7</sup> ‘I sang’ | <i>al-zemer-ku-m</i> ‘I didn’t sing’          |
|     | <i>zemer-k</i> ‘You (m) sang’         | <i>al-zemer-k-im</i> ‘You (m) didn’t sing’    |
|     | <i>zemer-sh</i> ‘You (f) sang’        | <i>al-zemer-sh-im</i> ‘You (f) didn’t sing’   |
|     | <i>zemer-e</i> ‘He sang’              | <i>al-zemer-e-m</i> ‘He didn’t sing’          |
|     | <i>zemer-ech</i> ‘She sang’           | <i>al-zemer-ech-im</i> ‘She didn’t sing’      |
|     | <i>zemer-en</i> ‘We sang’             | <i>al-zemer-en-im</i> ‘We didn’t sing’        |
|     | <i>zemer-achu</i> ‘You (pl) sang’     | <i>al-zemer-achu-m</i> ‘You (pl) didn’t sing’ |
|     | <i>zemer-u</i> ‘They sang’            | <i>al-zemer-u-m</i> ‘They didn’t sing’        |

By contrast, (2) shows the forms for a verb root ending in a vowel.

- |     |                                   |   |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---|
| (2) | <i>mesrat</i> ‘to work’           |   |
|     | <i>sera-w</i> ‘I worked’          | <i>al-sera-w-m</i> ‘I didn’t work’          |
|     | <i>sera-h</i> ‘You (m) worked’    | <i>al-sera-h-im</i> ‘You (m) didn’t work’   |
|     | <i>sera-sh</i> ‘You (f) worked’   | <i>al-sera-sh-im</i> ‘You (f) didn’t work’  |
|     | <i>sera</i> ‘He worked’           | <i>al-sera-m</i> ‘He didn’t work’           |
|     | <i>sera-ch</i> ‘She worked’       | <i>al-sera-ch-im</i> ‘She didn’t work’      |
|     | <i>sera-n</i> ‘We worked’         | <i>al-sera-n-im</i> ‘We didn’t work’        |
|     | <i>ser-achu</i> ‘You (pl) worked’ | <i>al-sera-chu-m</i> ‘You (pl) didn’t work’ |
|     | <i>ser-u</i> ‘They worked’        | <i>al-ser-u-m</i> ‘They didn’t work’        |

For both types of verbs, the past negative is formed with the *al-* prefix and the *-im* suffix. All V-final forms preserve the final root vowel with the exception of the third-person plural form *seru*. In this form, the final vowel is dropped and replaced with the *-u* suffix; otherwise, it would be indistinguishable from the 3M form. These two paradigms are summarized in table 9.

#### 8.1.2 Present/future positive, negative

In the present tense, there are several different forms for the positive and negative. Each form requires a prefix and a suffix, which is summarized in table 10. The different forms of *merot*’ are shown in (3).

---

<sup>7</sup>Arsema was unsure if this form was correct, and also provided *zemerkuwin*

Table 9: Subject affixes

form	C-final	V-final
1S	- <i>ku</i>	- <i>w</i>
2M	- <i>k</i>	- <i>h</i>
2F	- <i>sh</i>	- <i>sh</i>
3M	- <i>e</i>	- $\emptyset$
3F	- <i>ech</i>	- <i>ch</i>
1P	- <i>en</i>	- <i>n</i>
2P	- <i>achu</i>	- <i>achu</i>
3P	- <i>u</i>	- <i>u</i>

(3) *merot* ‘to run’

<i>iné i-rot’-ale-w</i> ‘I run’	<i>iné al-rot’-im</i> ‘I don’t run’
<i>ante ti-rot’-ale-h</i> ‘You (m) run’	<i>ante at-rot’-im</i> ‘You (m) don’t run’
<i>anchí ti-roch’-ale-sh</i> ‘You (f) run’	<i>anchí at-roch’-im</i> ‘You (f) don’t run’
<i>isu yí-rot’-ale</i> ‘He run’	<i>isu ay-rot’-im</i> ‘He doesn’t run’
<i>iswa ti-rot’-ale-ch</i> ‘She run’	<i>iswa at-rot’-im</i> ‘She doesn’t run’
<i>inya in-rot’-ale-n</i> ‘We run’	<i>inya an-rot’-im</i> ‘We don’t run’
<i>inante ti-rot’-al-achu</i> ‘You (pl) run’	<i>inante at-rot’-u-m</i> ‘You (pl) don’t run’
<i>inesu yí-rot’-al-u</i> ‘They run’	<i>inesu ay-rot’-u-m</i> ‘They don’t run’

In the positive forms, *-ale* occurs after the verb root and represents the present tense. Then, the V-final subject marking suffixes from table 9 occur after *ale*. The four different prefixes separate the forms into four different groups, as shown in table 10. This grouping seems arbitrary; it puts all 2nd person forms in one group along with the 3rd person feminine (group 2), while other third person forms are grouped (group 3) and first person forms are not grouped (groups 1 and 4). The second person feminine form also has palatalization in the verb root, as seen in (3).

Table 10: Present/future affixes

form	positive	negative	group
1S	<i>i-</i>	<i>al-</i>	1 ( <i>i-/al-</i> )
2M	<i>ti-</i>	<i>at-</i>	2 ( <i>ti-/at-</i> )
2F	<i>ti-</i>	<i>at-</i> + palatalization	2 ( <i>ti-/at-</i> )
3M	<i>yí-</i>	<i>ay-</i>	3 ( <i>yí-/ay-</i> )
3F	<i>ti-</i>	<i>at-</i>	2 ( <i>ti-/at-</i> )
1P	<i>in-</i>	<i>an-</i>	4 ( <i>in-/an-</i> )
2P	<i>ti-</i>	<i>at- -u</i>	2 ( <i>ti-/at-</i> )
3P	<i>yí-</i>	<i>ay- -u</i>	3 ( <i>yí-/ay-</i> )

These sentences may then be glossed like in (4) and (5), where G1 represents the group 1 prefix.

(4) *iné i-rot'-al-ew*  
 I G1.PRES-run-PRES-1S  
 'I run'

(5) *ante ti-rot'-al-eh*  
 2M G2.PRES-run-PRES-2M  
 'You run'

The negative forms of each have a prefix that changes depending on which group the form is in, and the person marker is dropped. Each of these prefixes may be a variation of the *al-* prefix, which is found in the past tense, and just like the past tense, each form has the *-im* suffix for negation. The prefixes represent the group of the person marking, the present tense, and negation, as shown in (6) and (7).

(6) *iné al-rot'-im*  
 I G1.PRES.NEG-run-NEG  
 'I don't run'

(7) *ante at-rot'-im*  
 2M G2.PRES.NEG-run-NEG  
 'You don't run'

Interestingly, the person marking suffix is absent in most of these negative forms. Only the 2P and 3P forms have a *-u* suffix which occurs before the *-im* suffix. This may represent the plural.

## 8.2 Object person marking in transitive verbs

Verbs also agree with objects using verbal affixes. These affixes vary between the past and the present/future tenses.

## 8.3 Past

In transitive verbs, the direct object is marked by a verbal suffix which occurs after the subject suffix (listed in table 10). In this way, the verb agrees with both the subject and the direct object. (8) shows the paradigm for the verb *mak'if* 'to hug.'

(8) *mak'if* 'to hug'  
*ak'if-e-ny* 'He hugged me'  
*ak'if-e-h* 'He hugged you (m)'  
*ak'if-e-sh* 'He hugged you (f)'  
*ak'if-e-w* 'He hugged him'  
*ak'if-at* 'He hugged her'  
*ak'if-e-n* 'He hugged us'  
*ak'if-achu* 'He hugged you (pl)'  
*ak'if-achew* 'He hugged them'

There are several phonological processes that change the surface forms of the affixes. For example, in (9), the third-person masculine singular subject is dropped when the object affix begins with a vowel. Additionally, in (10), the *u* of the 3F affix becomes *w* before a vowel. We see that this does not happen before a consonant in (9).

- (9) *ak'if-Ø-at*  
 hug-3M.S-3F.O  
 ‘He hugged her’

- (10) *ak'if-achw-at*  
 hug-2P.S-3F.O  
 ‘You (pl) hugged her’

These forms are summarized in table 11. There are slightly different forms when the suffixes occur after verbs and consonants. Additionally, the 3M form is *-t* after *u*.

Table 11: Object suffixes		
form	V_	C_
1S	<i>-ny</i>	<i>-iny</i>
2M	<i>-h</i>	<i>-ih</i>
2F	<i>-sh</i>	<i>-ish</i>
3M	<i>-w, -t/u_</i>	<i>-iw</i>
3F	<i>-t</i>	<i>-at</i>
1P	<i>-n</i>	<i>-in</i>
2P	<i>-achu</i>	<i>-achu</i>
3P	<i>-achew</i>	<i>-achew</i>

Additionally, we have evidence that suggests that indirect objects work similarly. In these examples, the direct object marker comes before the root, and the indirect object marker occurs as a verbal suffix. The verb agrees with the subject and the indirect object in (11).

- (11) *mest'et* ‘to give’
- |                               |                            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-iny</i>   | ‘She gave me a book’       |
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-ih</i>    | ‘She gave you (m) a book’  |
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-ish</i>   | ‘She gave you (f) a book’  |
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-u</i>     | ‘She gave him a book’      |
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-at</i>    | ‘She gave her a book’      |
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-in</i>    | ‘She gave us a book’       |
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-achu</i>  | ‘She gave you (pl) a book’ |
| <i>mets'af set'-ech-achew</i> | ‘She gave them a book’     |

## 8.4 Present

In the present tense, the order of the affixes changes. The paradigm is listed in (12). Here, we can see pronouns with the accusative suffix *-n*.

- (12) *mak'if* ‘to hug’
- |                      |                              |                     |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>iswa iné-n</i>    | <i>t-ak'if-ény-ale-ch</i>    | ‘She hugs me’       |
| <i>iswa ante-n</i>   | <i>t-ak'if-ih-ale-ch</i>     | ‘She hugs you (m)’  |
| <i>iswa anchí-n</i>  | <i>t-ak'if-ish-ale-ch</i>    | ‘She hugs you (f)’  |
| <i>iswa isu-n</i>    | <i>t-ak'if-ale-ch</i>        | ‘She hugs him’      |
| <i>iswa iswa-n</i>   | <i>t-ak'if-at-ale-ch</i>     | ‘She hugs her’      |
| <i>iswa inya-n</i>   | <i>t-ak'if-en-ale-ch</i>     | ‘She hugs us’       |
| <i>iswa inante-n</i> | <i>t-ak'if-achw-ale-ch</i>   | ‘She hugs you (pl)’ |
| <i>iswa inesu-n</i>  | <i>t-ak'if-wachew-ale-ch</i> | ‘She hugs them’     |

Two of these forms are glossed in (13) and (14). Interestingly, the object agreement marker occurs before the subject agreement marker, which is the opposite order of the past tense. Additionally, the object marker occurs before *-ale-*, and the subject marker occurs after it. In these glosses, the *t-* is glossed as a circumfix that likely corresponds to *ale* (and the present tense). These verb forms have the following template:

(group prefix)-ROOT-obj-*ale*-subj.

- (13) *iswa iné-n t-ak'if-ény-ale-ch*  
 she me-ACC G2.PRES-hug-1S.O-PRES-3F.S  
 ‘She hugs me’
- (14) *iswa isu-n t-ak'if-∅-ale-ch*  
 she me-ACC G2.PRES-hug-3M.O-PRES-3F.S  
 ‘She hugs him’

The negative forms of these lose their subject agreement markers. Negation is then marked with same affixes as in Table 10. This paradigm is shown in (15), two of these are glossed in (16) and (14).

- (15) *mak'if* ‘to hug’
- |                      |                          |                     |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>iswa iné-n</i>    | <i>at-ak'if-ény-im</i>   | ‘She hugs me’       |
| <i>iswa ante-n</i>   | <i>at-ak'if-ih-im</i>    | ‘She hugs you (m)’  |
| <i>iswa anchí-n</i>  | <i>at-ak'if-ish-im</i>   | ‘She hugs you (f)’  |
| <i>iswa isu-n</i>    | <i>at-ak'if-ew-m</i>     | ‘She hugs him’      |
| <i>iswa iswa-n</i>   | <i>at-ak'if-at-im</i>    | ‘She hugs her’      |
| <i>iswa inya-n</i>   | <i>at-ak'if-en-im</i>    | ‘She hugs us’       |
| <i>iswa inante-n</i> | <i>at-ak'if-achu-m</i>   | ‘She hugs you (pl)’ |
| <i>iswa inesu-n</i>  | <i>at-ak'if-achew-im</i> | ‘She hugs them’     |

The negative forms have the following template:

(neg. group prefix)-ROOT-obj-*im*

- (16) *iswa iné-n at-ak'if-ény-im*  
 she me-ACC G2.PRES.NEG-hug-1S.O-NEG  
 ‘She doesn’t hug me’
- (17) *iswa isu-n at-ak'if-ew-m*  
 she me-ACC G2.PRES.NEG-hug-3M.O-NEG  
 ‘She doesn’t hug him’

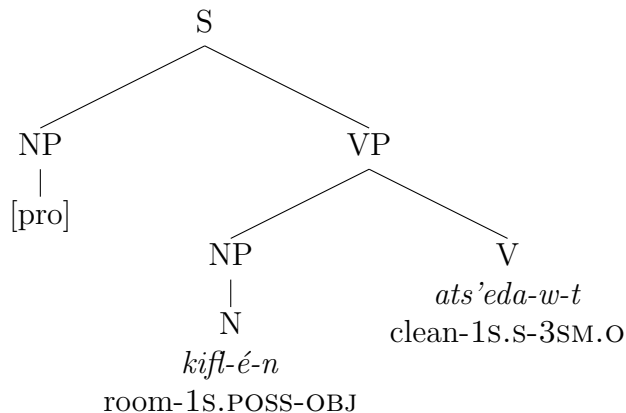
## 9 Causatives

Causatives are marked with the verbal prefix *as-*. In the causative form, the verb agrees with the causer (in the subject position) and the causee (in the object position). This is different from the non-causative form, in which the verb agrees with the subject and the object of the sentence, as seen in (1) with the verb *mats'dat* 'to clean.' However, the object is marked with the object suffix *-n* in both forms. We can see the causative form in (2).

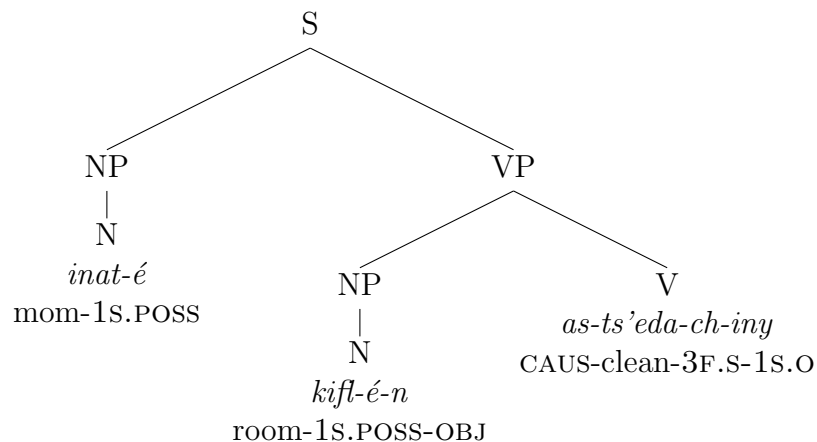
- (1) *kift-é-n*                      *ats'eda-w-t*  
 room-1S.POSS-OBJ clean-1S.S-3SM.O  
 'I cleaned my room'
- (2) *inat-é*                      *kift-é-n*                      *as-ts'eda-ch-iny*  
 mom-1S.POSS room-1S.POSS-OBJ CAUS-clean-3F.S-1S.O  
 'My mom made me clean my room'

(3) and (4) show the structures of both sentences.

(3)



(4)



## 10 Dependent clauses

### 10.1 Complement clauses

There are several types of complement clauses in Amharic.

#### 10.1.1 Complementizer prefixes

There are several examples of verbal prefixes that function as complementizers. In many of these examples, *inde-* is used; this is shown in (1) and (2).

- (1) *inde-mí-met'a* *belo-Ø-ny-al*  
 COMP-3M.COMP.PRES-come\3M.PAST said-3M.S-1S.O-al  
 ‘He said that he’s coming’
- (2) *temarí inde-hon-ku tenager-ku*  
 student COMP-be-1S.S said-1S.S.PAST  
 ‘I said that I was a student’

Another such prefix is *ke-*, which functions similarly in (3).

- (3) *k'onjo ke-hon-ech t'eye-kuwin*  
 pretty COMP-be-3F asked-1S.S.PAST  
 ‘I asked if she was pretty’

In some present tense examples, these prefixes are accompanied by a variation of *-mi-* and even a verbal suffix in the 2F, 2P, and 3P forms. It is unclear when these are used, as they occur in forms like (1) but not in forms like (2). This paradigm is shown in Table 12.<sup>8</sup>

Table 12: Complementizer forms

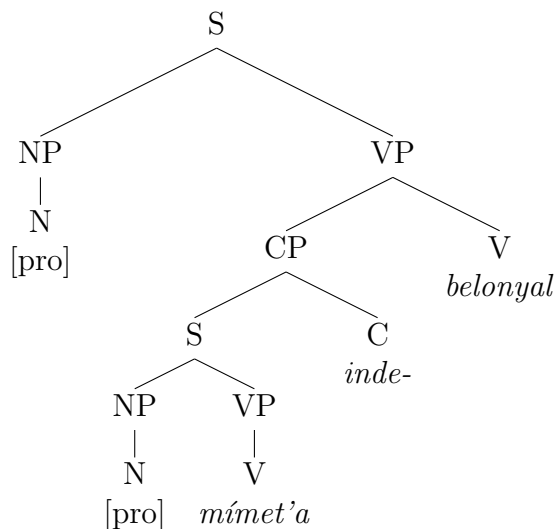
1S	<i>meblat inde-mi-felig</i>	‘that I want to eat’
2M	<i>meblat inde-mit-felig</i>	‘that you (m) want to eat’
2F	<i>meblat inde-mit-felig-í</i>	‘that you (f) want to eat’
3M	<i>meblat inde-mí-felig</i>	‘that he wants to eat’
3F	<i>meblat inde-mit-felig</i>	‘that she wants to eat’
1P	<i>meblat inde-mini-felig</i>	‘that we want to eat’
2P	<i>meblat inde-miti-felig-u</i>	‘that you (pl) want to eat’
3P	<i>meblat inde-felig-u</i>	‘that they want to eat’

(4) shows the structure of these sentences and the movement of the verb up to the complementizer *inde-*. As in the previous examples, the CP is the object of the verb *belonyal*.

<sup>8</sup>These groupings match those seen in Table 10 for subject person marking. The only difference is that the 2P form seems to be different from the other G2 forms.



(4)



### 10.1.2 Null complementizer

For direct quotations, complement clauses are formed without an explicit complementizer. This can be seen in (5) and (6).

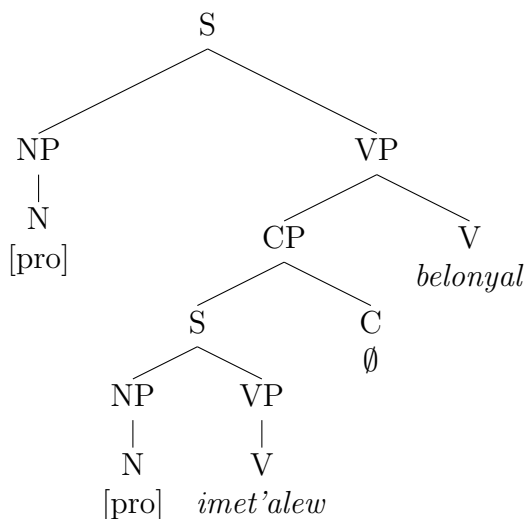
- (5) *i-met'-ale-w*                      *belo-∅-ny-al*  
 G1.PRES-come-PRES-1S said-3M.S-1S.O-al

‘He said, “I am coming”’<sup>9</sup>

- (6) *k'onjo nat*    *t'eye-kuwin*  
 pretty be\3F asked-1S  
 “‘Is she pretty?’” I asked’

In these sentences, the CP is the object of the main verb. These sentences have the following structure:

(7)



It is impossible to tell if verb moves up to the C as in other dependent clauses; however, it seems unlikely that these complement clauses would work any differently.

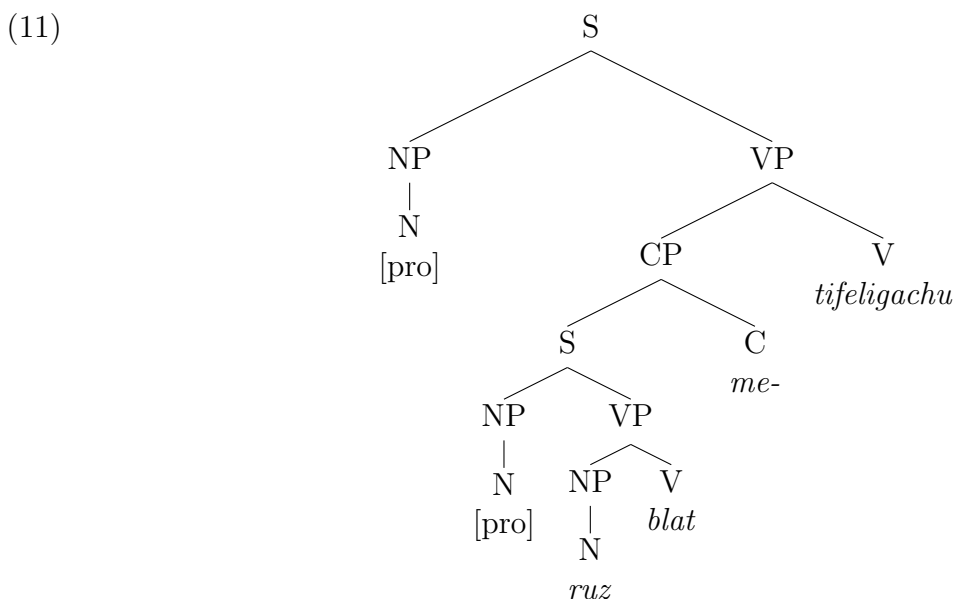
<sup>9</sup>The meaning of this -al suffix is unknown.

### 10.1.3 Infinitives

Infinitives are formed with the verbal prefix *me-* and function like other prefix complementizers. This is shown in (8), (9), and (10).

- (8) *me-blat i-felig-ale-w*  
 INF-eat G1.PRES-want-PRES-1S  
 ‘I want to eat’
- (9) *me-blat inde-mífelig negro-Ø-nya*  
 INF-eat COMP-want told-3M.S-1S.O  
 ‘He told me that he wants to eat’
- (10) *ruz me-blat ti-felig-achu wey?*  
 rice INF-eat G2.PRES-want-2P right?  
 ‘You all want to eat rice, right?’

The structure of these sentences is shown in (11). The verb *blat* ‘eat’ moves up from the V to the C (*me-*).



## 10.2 Relative clauses

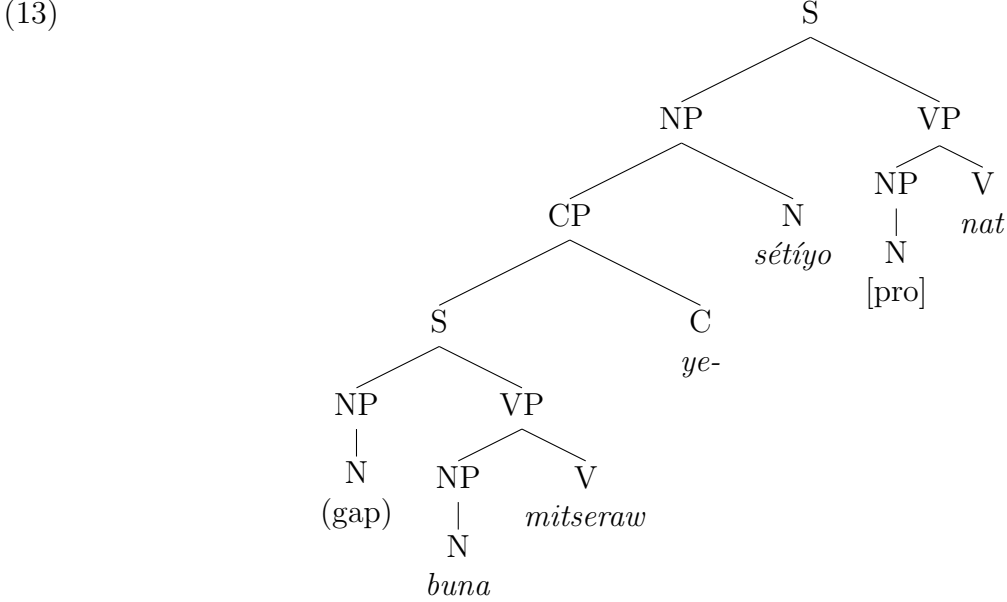
Relative clauses in Amharic are CPs that modify a head noun. They use the relativizer *ye-*, which occurs as a verbal prefix. Since Amharic is a head-final language, relative clauses occur before the nouns they modify.

### 10.2.1 Relativized subject

When the relativized noun phrase is a subject, we see a gap in the subject position of the relative clause. However, the verb still agrees with the missing subject. In (12), the verb *-sera-* agrees with the third person feminine subject *setíyo* (which is outside of the clause) and the third person masculine object *buna*.

- (12) *buna ye-mit-sera-w sétíyo nat*  
 coffee REL-3F.COMP.PRES-make-3M.O woman be\3F  
 ‘Who is the woman who makes coffee?’

We can see the structure of this sentence in (13). There is a gap at the subject of the embedded CP, and the verb moves up to the complementizer.



### 10.2.2 Relativized object

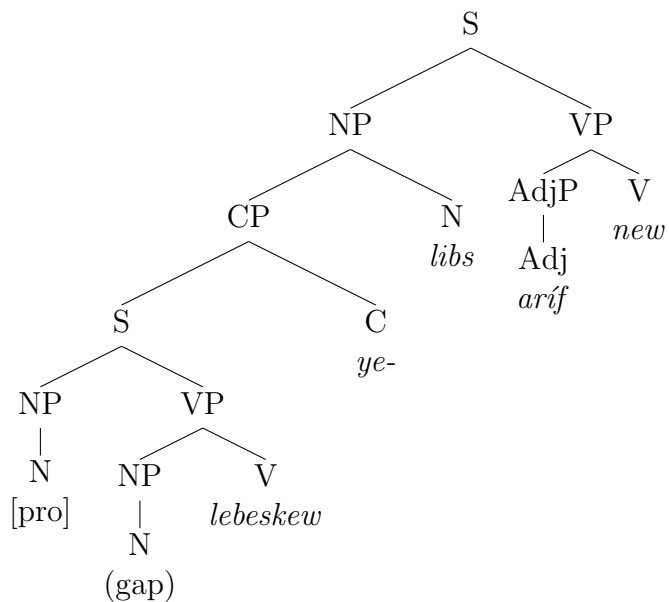
When the relativized noun phrase is a direct object, we see a gap in the object position of the relative clause. However, the verb still agrees with the person and number of the object, which is *libs* ‘clothes’ in (14).

- (14) *ye-lebes-ke-w libs aríf new*  
 REL-wear-2M.S-3S.O clothes nice be\3S  
 ‘The clothing that you wear is nice.’

In (14), the verb *-lebes-* agrees with the second person masculine subject and the third person singular object *libs* ‘clothes’.

The structure of this sentence can be seen in (15). There is a gap at the object of the embedded CP, and the verb moves up to the complementizer.

(15)

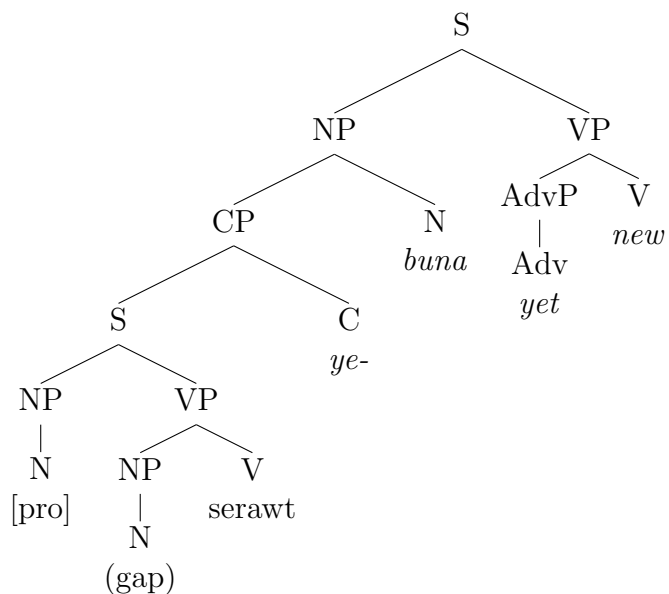


We can see another example of this in (16).

- (16) *ye-sera-w-t*                      *buna yet new*  
 REL-make-1S.S-3S.O coffee where be\3S  
 ‘Where is the coffee I made’

The structure of this sentence can be seen in (17). There is a gap at the object of the relative clause, and the verb moves up to the complementizer.

(17)



## 11 Appendix 1: Glossed Text

The following interaction between a mother and her daughter was written by Arsema.

- Mom: *Timirt indét new?*  
 Daughter: *Timirt aríf new.*  
 Mom: *Yemitiwejiw astemari aleh?*  
 Daughter: *Yené math astemari des yílal. Hísab lay bet'am yíredanyal.*  
 Mom: *Kesat min tadirgyalesh?*  
 Daughter: *Kesat lay, igir kwas ich'awetalew.*  
 Mom: *Timirtibétish bet'am des yílal.*

This conversation is glossed in (1-7).

- (1) *timirt indét new?*  
 how school be\3M  
 'How is school?'
- (2) *timirt aríf new*  
 school nice be\3M  
 'School is nice.'
- (3) *ye-miti-wej-iw astemari ale-h?*  
 REL-G2.COMP-love-3M.O teacher exist\3M  
 'Do you have a favorite teacher?'
- (4) *yené math astemari des yílal. hísab lay bet'am yí-reda-ny-al*  
 1S.POSS math teacher great is\3M. math on lots G2.PRES-help-1S.O-PRES  
 'My math teacher is great. He helps me with math.'
- (5) *kesat min t-adirgy-ale-sh*  
 afternoon what G2.PRES-do-PRES-2F  
 'What do you do after school?'
- (6) *kesat lay igir kwas i-ch'awet-ale-w*  
 afternoon in foot ball G1.PRES-play-PRES-1S  
 'After school I play soccer.'
- (7) *timirtibét-ish bet'am des yílal*  
 school-3F.POSS very great is\3M  
 'Your school is really great.'