

Structure of Ethio-Semitic Languages

LIN 4409/5609
Oakland University
Fall 2023

MWF 2:40pm – 3:47pm
Human Health Building 1006

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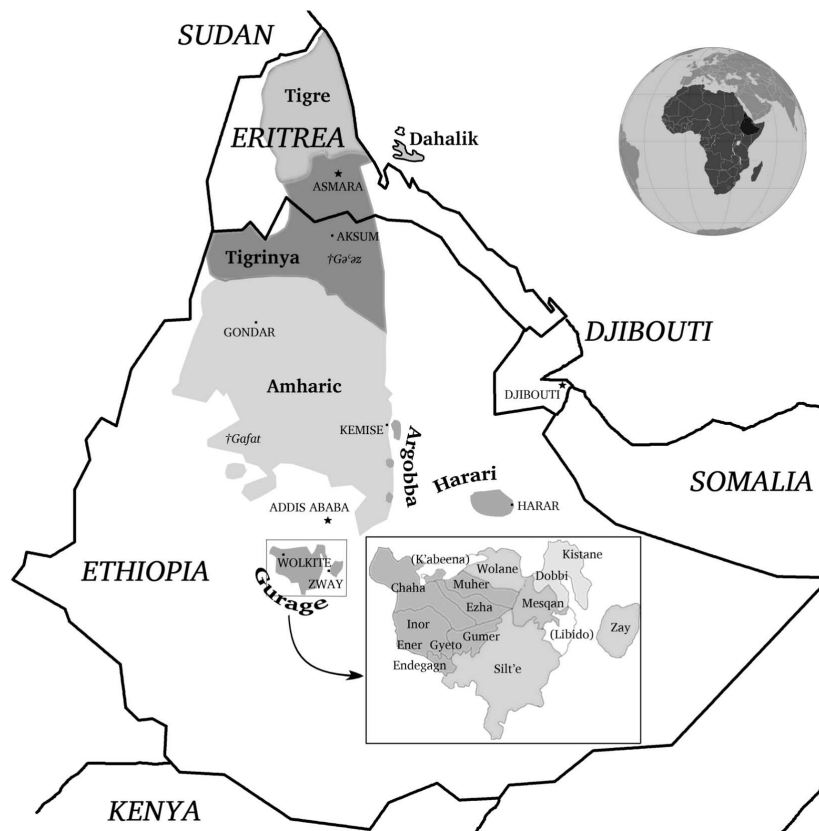


Figure 1: Distribution of Ethiosemitic languages in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan.

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1 General Course Overview

Our primary interest in this course will be topics pertaining to the Ethiosemitic languages of Eritrea and Ethiopia. This broadly includes:

- the history and classification of Semitic and Ethiosemitic languages,
- the grammatical and structural properties of Ethiosemitic languages,
- the characteristic formal properties of Ethiosemitic languages,

The semester will be broken into two parts.

1.1 Classification and Structure of Ethiosemitic Languages

We will start by taking some time to motivate the classification of the Ethiosemitic languages as a sub-branch of the Semitic language family, which is part of the Afro-Asiatic macrophylum:

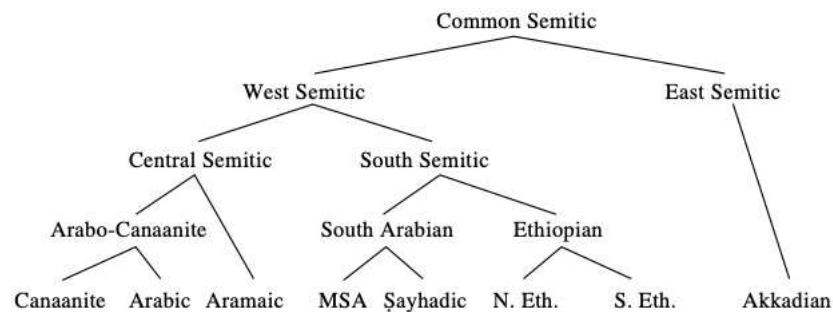


Figure 2: Semitic branch of Afro-Asiatic language family based on [Hetzron 1976](#) from [Huehnergard & Rubin 2011](#).

We will then look at some of the motivation for the classification of the Ethiosemitic branch:

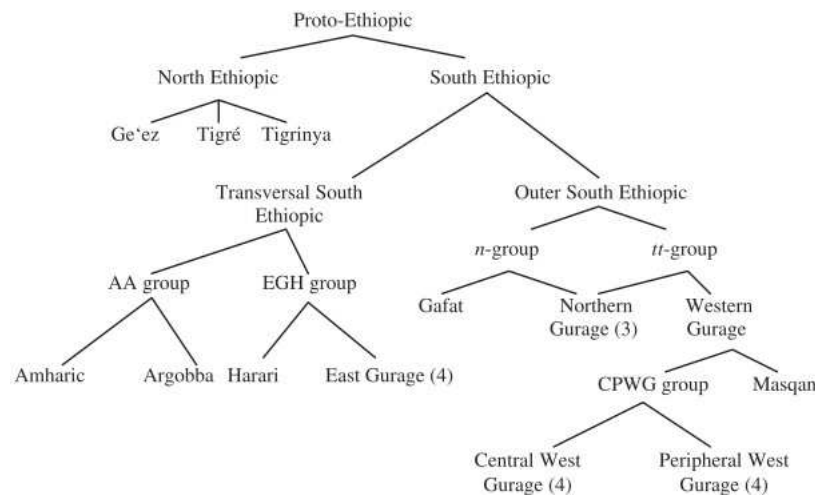


Figure 3: Ethiopian branch of Semitic language family based on [Hetzron 1972](#) from [Rubin 2008](#).

After this brief introduction we will investigate the basic grammatical and structural properties of the Ethiosemitic languages. With some additional stops and detours along the way, this will include:

- **Phonetics and Phonology** : The phones and (morpho)phonological alternations that characterize Ethiosemitic languages,
- **Morphology** : The morphological processes that characterize Ethiosemitic languages,
- **Syntax** : The structures and combinatoric processes that characterize Ethiosemitic languages.

1.2 Case Studies

The second half of the course will engage us in a series of case studies, some chosen by me and some by you.

• **Possession**: A characteristic property of the Semitic languages is the availability of multiple possessive frames or *states* (e.g., [Shlonsky 2004](#)). There is a prepositional genitive, referred to as the *free state* in (1a)/(2a). There is also an asyndetic genitive, referred to as the *construct state* in (1b)/(2b).

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>(1) <i>Hebrew</i></p> <p>a. <u>ha-dira</u> šel ha-sar
the-apartment of the-minister
‘the apartment of the minister’</p> <p>b. <u>dirat</u> ha-sar
apartment the-minister
‘the minister’s apartment’</p> | <p>(2) <i>Moroccan Arabic</i></p> <p>a. <u>d-dar</u> dyal l-wazir
the-apartment of the-minister
‘the apartment of the minister’</p> <p>b. <u>dar</u> l-wazir
apartment the-minister
‘the minister’s apartment’</p> |
|--|--|

Seemingly, Tigrinya, but not Amharic, has a construct state as well ([Kifle 2011](#)):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(3) <i>Tigrinya</i></p> <p>a. nəj təsfay <u>məts’haf</u>
of Tesfay book
‘the book of Tesfay’</p> | <p>b. <u>məts’haf</u> təsfay
book Tesfay
‘Tesfay’s book’</p> |
|---|--|

But, it comes with a few additional wrinkles explored by [Gebregziabher \(2012, 2013\)](#):

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>(4) <i>Tigrinya Alienable Possession</i></p> <p>a. nəj hagos <u>gəza</u>
of Hagos house
‘the house of Hagos’</p> <p>b. *<u>gəza</u> hagos
house Hagos
‘Hagos’s house’</p> | <p>(5) <i>Tigrinya Inalienable Possession</i></p> <p>a. *nəj hagos <u>hafti</u>
of Hagos sister
‘the sister of Hagos’</p> <p>b. <u>hafti</u> hagos
sister Hagos
‘Hagos’s sister’</p> |
|--|--|

This leads one to ask if Tigrinya actually has a construct state and how alienability affects the nominal syntax of possessives.

• **Prepositions:** Ethiosemitic languages, which are SOV and otherwise strongly head-final, are typologically odd for their use of prepositions (Gebregziabher 2013, Baker & Kramer 2014).

- (6) Almaz bet-u-n ayy-ätftj
Almaz house-DEF-ACC see-3FS
'Almaz saw the house.' (Amharic)
- (7) Tom [lä-gubiññit] [wädä ityop'p'iyä] hed-ä
Tom for-visit to Ethiopia go-3MS
'Tom went to Ethiopia for a visit.' (Amharic)
- (8) joni ni-hagos sərif-u-wwo
John DOM-Hagos insult.PRF-S3MS-O3MS
'John insulted Hagos.' (Tigrinya)
- (9) [mis-haw-u] [bi-məkina] məs'i?-u
with-brother-his by-car come.PRF-3MS
'He came by car with his brother.' (Tigrinya)

This typological anomaly could be an areal feature. Or, perhaps, these aren't real prepositions.

• **Transitivity alternations:** Cross-linguistically, certain verbs may appear in various valency frames as part of the *causative-inchoative* alternation:

- | | | | | | |
|------|----|---------------------|------|----|-----------------------|
| (10) | a. | The ice melted. | (11) | a. | The window broke. |
| | b. | Sue melted the ice. | | b. | Kim broke the window. |

Assuming that there is only a single verb *break* and *melt*, one or more of the following could be true:

- Transitive verbs can be intransitivized.
- Intransitive verbs that can be transitivized.
- Underspecified roots can be either intransitivized or transitivized

There is also the question of whether these processes occur before or during the syntactic derivation.

In purely descriptive terms, Ethiosemitic languages, including Amharic, display morphology that represent each of the possibilities above (Amberber 2000):

- | | | | | | | |
|------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (12) | <i>Amharic causative</i> | | (13) | <i>Amharic anticausative</i> | | |
| | a. | k'əllət'ə
'melt (intr.)' | | a. | səbbərə
'break (tran.)' | |
| | b. | a-k'əllət'ə
'melt (tran.)' | | b. | tə-səbbərə
'break (intr.)' | |
| (14) | a. | *k'əmmət'ə | b. | tə-k'əllət'ə
'sit (intr.)' | c. | as-k'əllət'ə
'set' |

An investigation of these processes may shed light on the debate.

• **Object Markers:** Verbs in Ethiosemitic languages may appear with suffixes that cross-reference their objects (Kifle 2011, Overfelt 2022, Baker & Kramer 2018).

- (15) Lamma [wiffa-w-in] ayy-ä-w
 Lemma dog-DEF.M-ACC see.PRF-S3MS-O3MS
 ‘Lemma saw the dog.’ (Amharic)

- (16) ?it-i bi?raj [n-ət-a lam] ri?j-u-wa
 that-3MS bull DOM-that-3FS cow see.PRF-S3MS-O3FS
 ‘The bull saw the cow.’ (Tigrinya)

The exact identity of these object markers is not entirely clear. They may represent instances of agreement that are similar to subject agreement or they may be better treated as instances of clitic-doubling.

- (17) Juan lo leyó [el libro]
 Juan it read the book
 ‘Juan read the book.’ (Spanish)

• **Shifted Indexicals (Monsters):** Natural languages make use of *indexical* elements, the interpretation of which is determined by a context of evaluation.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(18) I am tired.
 a. ≠ ‘Jason is tired.’
 b. = ‘The current speaker is tired.’</p> | <p>(19) Samantha arrives <u>today</u>.
 a. ≠ ‘Samantha arrives on Sept. 6th.’
 b. = ‘Samantha arrives on the current day.’</p> |
|---|--|

The inability to interpret indexicals with respect to contexts other than the context of utterance lead to an early hypothesis that there are no natural language elements that serve to shift the context of evaluation (Kaplan 1977). Their existence would be *monstrous*.

- (20) In some contexts, I am not tired.
 a. ≠ ‘There are contexts *c* whose speaker *s* is not tired.’
 b. = ‘For the current speaker *s*, there are contexts *c* in which *s* is not tired.’

Ethiosemitic languages delivered some of the earliest evidence for the existence of monsters (Schlenker 2003, Spadine 2020). Indexicals in Ethiosemitic languages can be interpreted with respect to the context of an attitude predicate, as opposed to the context of utterance.

- (21) ?on ?agna nə-ññ yil-all
 John hero be.PRF-O1S 3M.say-AUX-3M
 ‘John says that he is a hero.’
 Lit. ‘John says that I am a hero.’ (Amharic)

- (22) [hiwət ?anə nəti mətə?haf ?anbib-ə ?il-a] ti-?ammin
 Hiwet 1S.NOM DET book read-1S COMP-3FS 3FS-believe
 ‘Hiwet believes that she read the book.’
 Lit. ‘Hiwet believes that I read the book.’ (Tigrinya)

2 Course Website

Your primary interface with course material outside of class will be through the course website, which can be accessed at the following url: <https://joverfelt.net/teaching/lin-4409-5609/>

The password to access the site is *funtivities*.

I will use this space to post handouts and readings. I will also maintain an up-to-date schedule with due dates and the agenda. Before e-mailing me, check the website.

3 Course Requirements

Your grade will be calculated as a weighted average of your performance on four components:

$$\text{Grade} = (0.1)\overline{\text{participation}} + (0.2)\overline{\text{presentations}} + (0.2)\overline{\text{abstract}} + (0.5)\overline{\text{paper}}$$

There will be no extra credit. The grading scale for the course is as follows:

	D+ 67.0 – 69.9	C+ 77.0 – 79.9	B+ 87.0 – 89.9	
F 0 – 59.9	D 63.0 – 66.9	C 73.0 – 76.9	B 83.0 – 86.9	A 93.0 – 100
	D– 60.0 – 62.9	C– 70.0 – 72.9	B– 80.0 – 82.9	A– 90.0 – 92.9

3.1 Participation

Attendance and participation in lectures is key to succeeding in this course and, therefore, in future courses. Participating means that you are awake, you are engaging with the material, and you are contributing to discussion. Satisfactory participation is required to pass the course.

In line with Oakland University policies, masks must be properly worn for the duration of the lecture. You will also be expected to respect the personal space of your classmates.

This policy is subject to change with limited notice. More information can be found through the university's Return to Campus website:

<https://www.oakland.edu/return-to-campus/>

3.2 Presentations

You will have 2 presentations over the course of the semester.

The first of these will involve you leading a case study of some academic paper during a lecture marked TBD. You can choose from any of the recommended readings provided on the schedule or, with my approval, you can bring in another paper. Presentation dates are first-come-first-serve.

You must talk to me about your case study by the end of **Week 4 (09/25–09/29)**. You must provide some sort of visual aid for your presentation (e.g., a handout or slides).

The second presentation will be a presentation of your final project during the final two weeks of the semester. You must provide some sort of visual aid for your presentation (e.g., a handout or slides).

3.3 Abstract

By the end of **Week 11 (11/13–11/17)**, you must submit a one-page abstract that outlines your final project. Samples of what I have in mind can be found here:

<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/model-abstracts>

Abstracts are due as posted on the schedule. **I will not accept abstracts left in my departmental mailbox.** Abstracts must be submitted through Google Classroom, which can be accessed at the [Submit Coursework](#) link provided here, and on the course webpage. Use [this link](#) to join the Google Classroom with an oakland.edu account.

You must turn assignments in before the meeting in which they are due.

All assignments must be typed to be submitted. I have provided various resources in section [4.3](#) that may help you do this while adhering to the necessary formatting guidelines.

3.4 Final Paper

You are required to submit a final paper no later than **10:00pm on Saturday, December 16th**.

Your final paper is intended to be no longer than 10 double-spaced pages. The paper could take a number of different shapes:

- to sketch a problem and a possible analysis,
- write an evaluation of a paper not discussed in class,
- discuss a phenomenon not covered in class and previous accounts of it,
- approach some phenomenon through the lens of another language or experimentation, or
- something else.

Your paper must engage with and cite primary literature. If your paper includes a language other than English, you must follow the [Leipzig Glossing Rules](#).

I will not accept final papers left in my departmental mailbox. Abstracts must be submitted through Google Classroom, which can be accessed at the [Submit Coursework](#) link provided here, and on the course webpage. Use [this link](#) to join the Google Classroom with an oakland.edu account.

You must meet with me the end of **Week 9 (10/30–11/03)** to discuss paper topics. Meet with me early and often to talk about your project (or the lack of a project!).

4 Materials

4.1 Required Reading

Some lectures will be centered on a discussion of an article or book chapter. The schedule in section [7](#) indicates the date on which a given reading will be discussed.

These materials have all been made available on the course website. There is no required textbook for this class.

4.2 Recommended Reading

Recommended readings are intended to provide background or further discussion of some topic. These materials and others can be supplied upon request.

The following may also provide useful resources:

- Hetzron, Robert, ed. 1997. *The Semitic Languages, first edition*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Huehnergard, John & Na'ama Pat-El, eds. 2019. *The Semitic Languages, second edition*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lipiński, Edward. 2001. *Semitic Languages: Outline of a comparative grammar, second edition*. Leuven, BE: Peeters.
- Weninger, Stefan, ed. 2011. *The Semitic Languages: An international handbook*. Berlin, DE: De Gruyter Mouton.

4.3 Resources

The following links provide access to IPA fonts and keyboards:

- Installable Fonts and Keyboards: https://scripts.sil.org/cms/scripts/page.php?site_id=nrsi&id=ip
- Online Keyboard: <https://ipa.typeit.org/full/>

The following links provide syntactic tree drawing software or applets:

- TreeForm: <https://sourceforge.net/projects/treeform/>
- Syntax Tree Generator: <http://mshang.ca/syntree/>
- phpSyntaxTree: <http://ironcreek.net/phpsyntaxtree/>

If you use \LaTeX you can achieve much of what you need to with the `linguex`, `qtree`, `tree-dvips`, `tipa`, and `OTtblx` packages.

Other useful packages with more flexibility, but also with a more complicated syntax, are the `gb4e`, `pst-jtree`, and `forest` packages.

A free online \LaTeX editor can be found here: <https://www.overleaf.com/>. If you're interested, you can find a \LaTeX primer for linguists at the following links:

<https://adamliter.org/content/LaTeX/latex-workshop-for-linguists.pdf>

<https://bit.ly/39BdhIc>

5 Course Policies

5.1 Collaboration

Collaboration with your classmates is permitted and encouraged. You are not permitted to co-author presentations or final papers.

5.2 Lateness Policy

Excepting circumstances surrounding unforeseeable emergencies, late work will not be accepted without prior arrangement.

5.3 Academic Dishonesty

The Oakland University Student Conduct Code governs every aspect of this course. There will be zero tolerance or leniency for violations of this code.

More information about the Student Conduct Code can be found through the Dean of Students website:

<https://oakland.edu/deanofstudents/student-code-of-conduct/>

5.4 Sexual Harassment

Oakland University is committed to taking prompt and effective steps intended to end sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, relationship violence, and related retaliation, prevent their recurrence and, as appropriate, remedy their effects. All University members are prohibited from engaging in, or assisting or abetting another's engagement in, sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and related retaliation.

There will be zero tolerance or leniency for violations of this policy. More information, including contact information for the Title IX coordinator, can be found through the Human Resources website:

<https://oakland.edu/deanofstudents/sexual-assault-and-violence-initiative/>

5.5 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Oakland University provides equal access to and opportunity in its programs and facilities, without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

For more information, you can consult the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative website:

<https://oakland.edu/diversity/>

Note that speaking English natively is neither a requirement nor an advantage in this class. However, we will have exercises that rely on native speaker intuitions about English. If you are not a native English speaker, you may consult your own intuitions or you can ask someone else, including me, for intuitions.

6 University Resources

6.1 Accessibility Services

If you have a documented need for accommodations, please see me immediately after class.

If you have not yet requested a letter from the Disability Support Services, do so immediately by contacting them at any of the following:

North Foundation Hall 102A

(248) 370-3266

DSS@oakland.edu

You can also go to the following site for more information:

<https://oakland.edu/dss/>

6.2 Multilingual Services

Oakland University does *not* offer services for multilingual students (foreign or domestic) who feel they could benefit from English language support.

If you feel like you could benefit from these services, you should report this to your dean, then you might look into the services offered by the International Students and Scholars Office:

O'Dowd Hall 328

(248) 370-3358

isso@oakland.edu

You can also go to the following site for more information:

<https://oakland.edu/isso/>

6.3 Mental Health and Stress Management

Oakland University services are available to assist students experiencing barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation.

You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus via the OU Counseling Center website:

<https://oakland.edu/oucc/>

7 Schedule

We will attempt to adhere to the schedule on the following page. It is possible and likely that we will deviate from this schedule. It simply depends on the kind of feedback I get from you.

Week	Date	Topic	Required	Recommended
		FOUNDATIONS		
1	09/06	Introduction		
	09/08	Semitic Languages	Pat-El 2019	Lipiński 2001 , Rubin 2008 , Huehnergard & Rubin 2011
2	09/11	Ethiosemitic Languages	Weninger 2011	Feleke 2021
		PHONETICS & PHONOLOGY		
	09/13	Phonetics & Phonology	Edzard 2019 , Bulakh 2019	Buckley 1994 , 1997, Shosted & Rose 2011
		MORPHOLOGY		
	09/15	Inflectional Morphology	Edzard 2019 , Bulakh 2019	Rose 1997 , Buckley 1997 , 2000
3	09/18	Derivational and Root Morphology	Edzard 2019 , Bulakh 2019	McCarthy 1979 , Buckley 2003
	09/20	NO CLASS		
	09/22	NO CLASS		
		SYNTAX		
4	09/25	Nominal Syntax	Edzard 2019 , Bulakh 2019	Kifle 2011 , Kramer 2009 , 2016, Yohannes 2016
	09/27	Verbal Syntax	Edzard 2019 , Bulakh 2019	Amberber 1996 , Kifle 2011 , Yohannes 2016
	09/29	Clausal Syntax	Edzard 2019 , Bulakh 2019	Demeke 2003 , Kifle 2011 , Yohannes 2016
		CASE STUDIES		
5	10/02	Tigrinya Modal Syntax		Yohannes 2016:ch.6.3 , Gebregziabher 2021
	10/04	Tigrinya Possessives	Gebregziabher 2012	
	10/06	Tigrinya Possessives	Gebregziabher 2013:ch.4	Shlonsky 2004
6	10/09	Tigrinya Relative Clauses	Overfelt 2009:sec.3	de Vries 2002
	10/11	Tigrinya Ditransitive	Overfelt 2022	Kifle 2011 , van der Wal 2018
	10/13	TBD		
7	10/16	Amharic Prepositions	Baker & Kramer 2014	Kramer 2010
	10/18	Tigrinya Copulas	Kifle 2011:ch.2.4.3	Zellou 2010 , Gebregziabher 2021
	10/20	NO CLASS		

Week	Date	Topic	Required	Recommended
8	10/23	TBD		
	10/25	TBD		
	10/27	TBD		
9	10/30	Amharic Prepositions	Baker & Kramer 2014	Kramer 2010
	11/01	Amharic Valency Alternations	Amberber 2000	Amberber 1996, Kifle 2011
	11/03	Amharic Valency Alternations	Ayalew 2011	Workneh 2019
10	11/06	TBD		
	11/08	TBD		
	11/10	TBD		
11	11/13	Amharic Object Markers	Kramer 2014	Baker 2012
	11/15	Amharic Object Markers	Baker & Kramer 2018	Riedel 2009, van der Wal 2018
	11/17	TBD		
12	11/20	TBD		
	11/22	NO CLASS		
	11/24	NO CLASS		
13	11/27	Tigrinya Hyperagreement		Henderson 2006, Sheehan & van der Wal 2018
	11/29	Tigrinya Shifted Indexicals	Spadine 2020:ch.3	Schlenker 2003
		PRESENTATIONS		
	12/01	Project Presentations		
14	12/04	Project Presentations		
	12/06	Project Presentations		
	12/09	Project Presentations		
	12/16	TERM PAPER DUE		

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