

# Amharic Transitivity Alternations

Lecture 21

November 1, 2023

## 1 Introduction

**Valency Frames.** Predicates of a given language are commonly offered in various **valency frames**:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (1) <i>Intransitive</i>                          |   |
| a. <i>Unergative</i><br>A man coughed.           | b. <i>Unaccusative</i><br>A train arrived.                |
| (2) <i>Alternating Unaccusatives</i>             |   |
| a. <i>Inchoative</i><br>The window broke.        | b. <i>Causative</i><br>Edith broke the window.            |
| (3) <i>Ambitransitive</i>                        |   |
| a. <i>Intransitive</i><br>Gilberto baked.        | b. <i>Transitive</i><br>Gilberto baked some scones.       |
| (4) <i>Transitive</i><br>Kate built a birdhouse. | (5) <i>Ditransitive</i><br>Robert sent Marcella a letter. |

**Valency Alternations.** A given language may have various means by which the valency frame a predicate can be adjusted:

- |                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| (6) <i>Passivization</i>       |   |
| a. Gilberto baked the scones.  | → b. The scones were baked (by Gilberto). |
| (7) <i>Antipassivization</i>   |   |
| a. Beth shot the target.       | → b. Beth shot at the target.             |
| (8) <i>Causativization</i>     |   |
| a. The window broke.           | → b. Edith broke the window.              |
| (9) <i>Anticausativization</i> |   |
| a. The window broke.           | ← b. Edith broke the window.              |

- (10) *Applicativization*
- a. Gilberto baked #(for) Melinda.
  - b. Gilberto baked Melinda some scones
  - c. Gilberto baked some scones \*(for) Melinda

**Valency Encoding.** Languages differ in how they encode the valency of a predicate or its valency alternations.

English, which has relatively impoverished morphology, relies largely on word order and/or periphrasis to signal the valency alternations of a predicate.

The Ethiosemitic languages have morphological means by which the valency alternations of a predicate can be encoded, as well as paraphrastic means.

- **Valency Decreasing Devices**

- Passivization
- Anticausativization
- Reflexivization/Reciprocalization

- **Valency Increasing Devices**

- Applicativization
- Causativization

**The Stakes.** Investigating valency encoding strategies will inform theories of how transitivity alternations should be theoretically modeled (e.g., [Koontz-Garboden 2009](#)):

- Arguments can only be removed from the valency frame of a predicate.
- Arguments can only be added to the valency frame of a predicate.
- Underspecified roots can have arguments either added or removed from their valency frame.

This work may also inform theories of where in our grammatical models valency alternations occur:

- The valency frame of a predicate is determined syntactically.
- The valency frame of a predicate is determined pre-syntactically in the lexicon/morphology.
- Valency frames can be altered both pre-syntactically or syntactically.

[Bresnan \(1982\)](#) argues that passivization (i.e., the relationship between a predicate and its arguments) is determined before derivational lexical operations and, therefore, is itself lexical.

- (11) a. (i) They offered the customer the car.  
(ii) The customer was offered \*(the car).  
b. (i) They offered the car to the customer.  
(ii) The car was offered (to the customer).
- (12) a. \*the offered customer  
b. the offered car

(13)	<i>Amharic causative</i>	(14)	<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.)'
(15)	a. *k'əmmət'ə	b. tə-k'əmmət'ə 'sit (intr.)'	c. as-k'əmmət'ə 'set, put'

(16)	a.	fəllə		c.	a-fəllə
		‘boil (intr.)			‘boil (tr.)’
	b.	tə-fəllə		d.	as-fəllə
		‘be boiled’			‘cause the boiling of’

**Passive.** Transitive predicates can be passivized, demoting the external argument and promoting the internal argument to subject.

- Unaccusative predicates typically cannot be passivized.

- 3

Amharic permits unergative verbs to appear in the equivalent of “impersonal passives” (Workneh 2019). Unaccusative forms seem to have a sardonic impersonal passive form.

- (20)   zare   timhirt-bet   tə-wajpito-al  
          today school     NACT-swim-AUX.S3MS  
          ‘There was swimming at school today.’  
          Lit. ‘It was swum at school today.’

- (21)   wədə   bet     tə-hedə  
          to     home PASS-go.PERF-3MS  
          ‘So you’re going home!’

**Anticausative.** Some transitive predicates with “intimately involved” agent/causer (*open, break, split, tear, scatter*, etc.) have anticausative (i.e., inchoative) forms encoded by the [t(ə)-] prefix.

- |      |    |            |  |    |            |
|------|----|------------|--|----|------------|
| (22) | a. | kəffətə    |  | b. | tə-kəffətə |
|      |    | open (tr.) |  |    | ANTC-open  |

While the distinction between the passive and anti-causative is subtle in Amharic, a passive reading can be forced with the inclusion of an agentive *by*-phrase or agent-oriented adverb.

- (23)   t’ərmus-u   (bə-lidʒ-u)   tə-səbbərə  
          bottle-DEF by-boy-DEF ANTC/PASS-open.PERF-3MS  
          ‘The bottle broke/The bottle was broke (by the boy).’

- (24)   a.   bər-u     tə-kəffətə  
              rope-DEF ANTC-PRF.open.3MS  
              ‘The door opened.’  
        b.   bər-u     bə-t’inik’k’ak’e   tə-kəffətə  
              rope-DEF with-care     PASS-PRF.open.3MS  
              ‘The door was opened with care.’

If a verb allows the anticausative it also allows the passive, but not vice versa. Verbs that denote events that are necessarily volitionally caused, only allow passive interpretation.

- (25)   anas’i-Λ     t’awla-w-in     fəllət’ə  
          carpenter-DEF plank-DEF-ACC chop.PERF-3MS  
          ‘The carpenter chopped the plank’

- (26)   t’awla-w   tə-fəllət’ə  
          plank-DEF PASS-chop.PERF-3MS  
          ‘The plank was chopped.’  
          ≠ ‘The plank copped.’

**Reflexives.** Some transitive verbs are naturally reflexive and can be reflexivized by the addition of the prefix [t(ə)-]. These forms may also permit a passive interpretation.

- (27) ləmma tə-latʃˈtʃ-ə  
 Lemma REFL--shave-PERF-3MS  
 ‘Lemma shaved (himself).’  
 ‘Lemma was shaved.’

Other transitive verbs cannot be reflexivized with [t(ə)-] and require a reflexive pronoun.

- (28) a. \*ləmma tə-mætta  
 Lemma REFL-PRF.hit.3MS  
 ‘Lemma hit himself.’  
 b. ləmma ras-u-n  
 Lemma self-POSS.3MS-ACC  
 mætta  
 PRF.hit.3MS  
 ‘Lemma hit himself.’

The morphological and reflexive form is incompatible with the reflexive pronoun.

- (29) \*ləmma ras-u-n tə-latʃˈtʃ-ə  
 Lemma self-POSS.3MS-ACC REFL-PRF.-shave.3MS  
 ‘Lemma shaved himself.’ (‘Lemma shaved his head’)

**Reciprocals.** Reciprocity of transitive verbs can be expressed with the prefix [t(ə)-] and the choice between two strategies.

The prefix [t(ə)-] plus a reduplicative form has a reciprocal meaning.

- (30) wɪff-otʃtʃ-u tə-nəkakkəs-u  
 dog-P-DEF RECP-PRF.-bit.3P  
 ‘The dogs bit each other.’

The prefix [t(ə)-] plus a (Case-less) reciprocal proform has a reciprocal meaning.

- (31) səww-otʃtʃ-u ɪrsbərs-atʃtʃəw tə-dəbaddəb-u  
 person-P-DEF each.other-POSS.3P RECP-PRF.-him.3P  
 ‘The people hit each other.’

**Summary.** To the extent that it looks like all of these valency-decreasing devices employ an element with the same morphological shape, we should start to wonder if they are all derived via a single morpheme.

The analytical challenge becomes assigning a meaning to [t(ə)-] that can do all of this work.

It’s worth noting that it is common to find that anticausatives, passives, reflexives, and sometimes reciprocals, behave as a natural class and employ similar morphology cross-linguistically. The cover term often found for this class is the *middle voice*.

### 3 Valency-Increasing Devices

Amharic has causativization and applicativization strategies for increasing the valency of a predicate. (See Kifle 2011 for discussion of Tigrinya.)

**Applicativization.** Transitive and intransitive verbs can have their valency increased with applicative suffixes on the verb.

- (32) a. aster bə-mət'rəgija-w dədʒdʒ t'ərrəgə-tʃtʃ  
Aster with-broom-DEF doorway PRF.sweep.3FS  
'Aster swept a doorway with the broom.'
- b. aster mət'rəgija-w-in dədʒdʒ t'ərrəgə-tʃtʃ-ibbət  
Aster broom-DEF-ACC doorway PRF.sweep.3FS-APPL.3MS  
'Aster swept a doorway with the broom.'

Applicativization takes indirect objects (obliques) and adjuncts and lifts them to the status of a direct object, as indicated by accusative case.

Various roles can be encoded as applicative arguments including: instruments, benefactives, malefactors, and locatives.

- (33) a. aster-in fərrədə-llat  
Aster with-broom-DEF doorway PRF.sweep.3FS  
'He judged her favorably.'  
'He judged in Aster's favor.' (‘He acquitted her.’)
- b. aster-in fərrədə-bbat  
Aster with-broom-DEF doorway PRF.sweep.3FS  
'He judged her unfavorably.'  
'He judged to the disadvantage of Aster.' (‘He convicted her.’)

It is possible to observe applicativization interacting in interesting ways with the underlying valency frame of a predicate.

**Direct Causative.** Unaccusatives and some transitive predicates with “tangentially involved” agents (*stand, melt, exit, burn, grow*, etc.) allow a causative form encoded by the [a-] prefix.

- (34) a. k'ibe-w k'əllət'ə  
butter-DEF PRF.melt.3MS  
'The butter melted.'
- b. aster k'ibe-w a-k'əllət'ə  
Aster butter-DEF CAUS-PRF.melt.3MS  
'Aster melted the butter.'

The causative [a-] generally does not prefix to unergatives and agentive transitives, namely predicates that already have a causer.

The added causer acts directly to initiate the event expressed by the verb, but it does not have control over that event.

**Indirect Causative.** Some transitive, unergative, and unaccusative predicates allow a causative form encoded by the [as-] prefix.

- (35) a. aster tʃ'əffər-ətʃtʃ  
Aster dance.PERF-3FS  
'Aster danced.'
- b. ləmma aster-in as-tʃ'əffər-at  
Lemma Aster-ACC CAUS-dance.PERF-S3MS-O3FS  
'Lemma made Aster dance.'
- (36) a. aster siga-w-in k'orrət'-ətʃtʃ  
Aster meat-DEF-ACC cut.PERF-O3FS  
'Aster cut the meat.'
- b. ləmma aster-in (siga) as-k'orrət'-ətʃtʃ  
Lemma Aster-ACC meat CAUS-cut.PERF-O3FS  
'Lemma made Aster cut (some meat).'

Descriptively speaking, the mechanism of [as-] causativization results in the agent of the event denoted by the verb being expressed as a direct object while the causer appears as the subject.

The causer often is not involved directly in the causing event, though it may act volitionally or non-volitionally.

- (37) ləmma aster-in as-wət't'a-t  
Lemma Aster-ACC CAUS-PV.exit-S3MS-O3MS  
a.) 'Lemma made Aster exit.'  
b.) 'Lemma let Aster exit.'

There is also a supposed "causative of the passive" interpretation that can arise when [as-] is applied to certain predicates. A reasonable paraphrase with English may be using *get*-passives.

- (38) a. They arrested Aster.  
b. Aster got arrested.  
c. Lemma got Aster arrested.

## 4 Looking Forward

According to [Ayalew 2011](#), the actual contribution of the causative prefix [as-] is dependent on the valency (encoding) of the base:

Basic stem	Gloss	t-stem	a-stem	as-stem	as-stem interpretation
a) gəddələ	‘kill’	t-gəddələ	-----	as-gəddələ-	(i) causative of the transitive (ii) causative of the passive
b) wət’t’a	‘go out’	-----	a-wət’t’a	as-wət’t’a	indirect causative
c) fəlla	‘boil (intr.)’	t-fəlla	a-fella	as-fella	(i) indirect causative (ii) causative of the passive

In short:

- The prefix [as-] shows the cumulative distribution of [a-] and [t(ə)-] and
- the availability of the ‘causative of the passive’ interpretation depends on the independent availability of the passive.
  - [as] + Agentive/Transitive (a) : causative of the transitive
  - [as] + Non-agentive/Intransitive (b/c) : indirect causative
  - [as] + Anticausativizeable (a/c) : causative of the passive

One way to interpret these facts is that the [as-] prefix is an amalgamation of [a-] and [t(ə)]: /at/ → [as]. The challenge then becomes understanding the [as-] causative of unaccusatives.

This is a challenge taken up by [Ayalew \(2011\)](#). And the proposed solution will inform conceptions of how the grammar achieves valency alternations. A more recent take on the problem can be found in [Workneh \(2019\)](#).

## References

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