

Ayalew, Bezza Tesfaw. 2011. *Causative of the ‘Passive’ in Amharic*. Proceedings of ACAL 40. 53–64.

Lecture 22

November 3, 2023

1 Introduction

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

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

And these processes may occur syntactically or lexically, before the syntactic derivation.

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

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| (1) <i>Amharic causative</i> | (2) <i>Amharic anticausative</i> |
| a. k'əllət'ə
‘it melted’ (intr.) | a. səbbərə
‘he broke s.t.’ (tran.) |
| b. a-k'əllət'ə
‘he melted s.t.’ (dir. caus.) | b. tə-səbbərə
‘it broke’ (anti.) |
| (3) a. *k'əmmət'ə | b. tə-k'əllət'ə
‘sit’ (intr.) |
| | c. as-k'əllət'ə
‘set’ (tran.) |

These are among the facts that may shed light on the questions above. Also among them is the status of the suspected “causative of the passive” interpretation of the indirect causative in the Amharic:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (4) a. fəllə
‘it boiled’ (intr.) | c. a-fəllə
‘he boiled it’ (dir. caus.) |
| b. tə-fəllə
‘it was boiled’ (anti.) | d. as-fəllə
‘he got s.o. to boil s.t.’ (indr. caus.)
‘he got s.t. boiled by s.o.’ (caus. pass.) |

[Ayalew \(2011\)](#) argues that the [as-] prefix is an amalgamation of [a-] and [t(ə)] whereby each affix lexically alters the valency frame of a predicate to contribute to the interpretation.

2 The Derivational Paradigm

An Amalgamation Approach. This helps understand the fact that function of [as-] in fact differs on the basis of the kind of stem it combines with. Moreover, these functions correlate with the valency frame and derived forms of the stem.

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 available interpretations from the addition of [as-] depends on the independent availability of the passive.
 - [as] + Agentive/Transitive (a) : (i) ?causative of the transitive / (ii) causative of the passive
 - [as] + Non-agentive/Intransitive (b/c) : indirect causative
 - [as] + Anticausativizeable (a/c) : (i) indirect causative / (ii) causative of the passive

This suggests that [as-] forms have access to the properties of the other two forms as well as the base.

A Single Causative [a(+s)-]. This is the approach by [Berhane \(1992\)](#), but it leaves unexplained **why** the function of [as-] varies according predicate type.

Separate Causatives [a-]/[as-]. This is the approach by [Amberber \(1996\)](#), such that [a-] is lexical and [as-] is syntactic, but it fails to capture **that** the function of [as-] varies according to predicate type.

3 Argument Structure and Affixations

This proposed treatment of [as-] can be embedded within a theory of argument structure as a lexically encoded property of predicates.

- (5)
- ((Theme)) = unaccusative
 - (Agent) = unergative
 - (Agent(Theme)) = transitive

The role of affixes is to lexically derive new argument structures.

- (6)
- | | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|-----------|---|-----------------|---|-----------|
| /fəllə/ | → | /t-fəllə/ | → | /a-t-fəllə/ | ⇒ | [asfəllə] |
| (Agent(Theme)) | → | ((Theme)) | → | (Causer(Theme)) | | |

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

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

For Ayalew (2011), these are predicates that can be classified as (alternating) unaccusatives.

'a-' derived agentives

Base	Gloss	a-stem	Gloss
wərrəd-	'descend'	a-wərrəd-	'bring down'
k'əllət'-	'melt'	a-k'əllət'-	'melt tr.'
a-mət't'a	'come'	a-mət't'a	'bring'
t'ək'k'wər-	'turn black'	a-t'ək'k'wər-	'blacken'

This is a reflection of the fact that unaccusative predicates are encoded with only a Theme and are compatible with the addition of a more prominent argument, which I gloss as Causer.

- (8) /k'əllət'/ → /a-k'əllət'/ ⇒ [a-k'əllət']
 ((Theme)) → (Causer(Theme))
 'melt (intr.)'

The causative [a-] does not prefix to lexically agentive unergative and transitive predicates. The results leads to a prominence conflict between the Agent and Causer.

- (9) /gəddələ/ → /a-gəddələ/ ⇒ *[a-gəddələ]
 (Agent(Theme)) → *(Causer!Agent(Theme))
 'kill' (tran.)

[as]-Causative. Many transitive and intransitive predicates allow a causative form encoded by the [as-] prefix.

- (10) a. aster tʃ'əffərə-tʃtʃ
Aster dance.PERF-3FS
'Aster danced.'
- b. ləmma aster-in as-tʃ'əffər-at
Lemma Aster-ACC CAUS-dance.PERF-S3MS-O3FS
'Lemma let/made Aster dance.'
- (11) a. aster siga-w-in k'orrət'ə-tʃtʃ
Aster meat-DEF-ACC PRF.cut.O3FS
'Lemma cut the meat.'
- b. ləmma aster-in (siga) as-k'orrət'ə-tʃtʃ
Lemma Aster-ACC meat CAUS-PRF.cut.O3FS
'Lemma let/made Aster cut the meat.'

4 Causative of the Passive

The Medio-Passive Affix. Amharic derives passive and anticausative verb forms with the prefix [t(ə)-].

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

- (16) gəməd-u (bə-aster) tə-k'orrət'ə
 rope-DEF by-aster PASS-PRF.cut.3MS
 'The rope was cut (by Aster).'

Unergative intransitive verbs, but not unaccusative intransitive verbs, can be passivized. The result is an impersonal passive.

- | | | | |
|------|--|------|-----------------------------|
| (17) | a. zəffənə
'He sang.' | (18) | a. mət't'a
'He came.' |
| | b. tə-zəffənə
PASS-sang
'There was singing.' | | b. *tə-mət't'a
PASS-come |

Some transitive predicates with “intimately involved” agents (*open, break, split, tear, scatter*, etc.) have inchoative forms encoded by the [t(ə)-] prefix.

- | | | |
|------|--|-----------------------------|
| (19) | a. kəffətə
'he opened s.t.' (tran.) | b. *tə-kəffətə
ANTC-open |
|------|--|-----------------------------|

In both of the cases above, an external Agent argument is suppressed. In the terms of the assumed theory, this removes the Agent from the lexically encoded argument structure of the predicate.

- (20) (Agent(Theme)) → ((Theme))

Causativization of the Medio-Passive. Cyclic applications of passivization and causativization results in the ‘causative of the passive.’

Passivization suppresses the Agent argument, deriving a non-agentive form. The prefix [a-], which combines with non-agentive forms, can introduce a more prominent Causer argument.

- (21) /fəllə/ → /t-fəllə/ → /a-t-fəllə/ ⇒ [asfəllə]
 (Agent(Theme)) → ((Theme)) → (Causer(Theme))
 'cause the boiling of'

Among the remaining question is why we don't observe the forms [as-tə-fəllə] or [a-t-fəllə].

The offered explanation is that lexically/morphologically conditioned changes affect the pronunciation of [t(ə)-] following [a-].

Causativization of certain [t(ə)-]prefixed predicates triggers homorganic assimilation to the first radical, resulting in gemination.

‘a-’ on ‘t-stem’ bases

t-stem	a-t-stem	Gloss
t-gaffət’-	a-g-gaffət’-	‘collide’
t-kərayy-	a-k-kərayy-	‘rent’
t-bəsač’č’-	a-b-bəsač’č’-	‘annoy’
t-zəgajj-	a-z-zəgajj-	‘be ready’

Causativization of other [t(ə)-]prefixed predicates triggers spirantization of [t(ə)-], resulting in [s].

‘as-stem’ for ‘a-t-stem’ on bound bases

t-stem	a-stem	as-stem	Gloss
t-dəssət-	*a-dəssət-	asdəssət-	‘be happy’
t-rəkkəb-	*a-rəkkəb-	asrəkkəb-	‘receive’
t-k’əmmət’-	*a-k’əmmət’-	ask’əmmət’-	‘sit’
t-kəttəl-	*a-kəttəl-	askəttəl-	‘follow’

Concerning prefixation of [as-] to unaccusatives, its compatibility with alternating unaccusatives is predicated on their lexical encoding of an Agent argument and detransitivization.

- (22) /fəlla/ → /t-fəllə/ → /a-t-fəllə/ ⇒ [asfəllə]
 (Agent(Theme)) → ((Theme)) → (Causer(Theme))
 ‘cause the boiling of’

Some Remaining Questions. But there are still some remaining puzzles regarding the distribution of [as-].

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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

1. It’s not clear how the amalgamated form [as-] combines with unalternating unaccusatives, which must not be encoded without an Agent. To the best that I can tell, this is not addressed.

- (23) /wət’t’a/ → /a-wət’t’a/ ⇒ [awət’t’a]
 (Theme) → (Causer(Theme))
 ‘make X get out’

- (24) /wət’t’a/ → */t-wət’t’a/ → /a-t-wət’t’a/ ⇒ [aswət’t’a]
 (Theme) → (Theme) → (Causer(Theme))
 ‘get X out’

2. It's not clear how [a-] combines with alternating unaccusatives.

- (25) /fəlla/ → /a-fəlla/ ⇒ [afəlla]
 (Agent(Theme)) → *(Causer!Agent(Theme))
 'make boil'

The suggestion seems to be that they lack an Agent argument, meaning a Causer can be added. But this seems to me to say that they cannot be prefixed with [t(ə)-], seeing as they lack an Agent.

But they can be prefixed with [t(ə)-], and the consequence, based on the suggestion made (Ayalew 2011:61–62), is that there are derivations that proceeds as:

- (26) /fəlla/ → /a-fəlla/ → /t-Ø-fəlla/ → /a-t-Ø-fəlla/ ⇒ [asfəlla]
 ((Theme)) → (Causer(Theme)) → (Theme) → (Causer(Theme))
 'cause the boiling of'

3. It's not clear why [t(ə)-] being applied to [a-]-derived forms is unattested.

- (27) /wət't'a/ → /a-wət't'a/ → */t-a-wət't'a/ ⇒ *[tawət't'a]
 (Theme) → (Causer(Theme)) → ((Theme))
 's.o was made by X to leave'

5 Syntactically Encoded Argument Structure

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.

- (28) 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).
 (29) a. *the offered customer
 b. the offered car

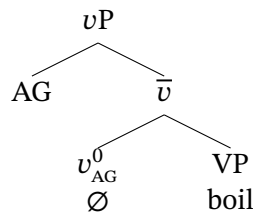
It is possible to provide arguments that passivization involves more syntactic structure than is found in inchoatives, suggesting that passivization is syntactic.

- (30) a. The window broke *(by Edith)
 b. The window was broken (by Edith)
 (31) a. The window broke again.
 b. The window was broken (again) by Edith (again).

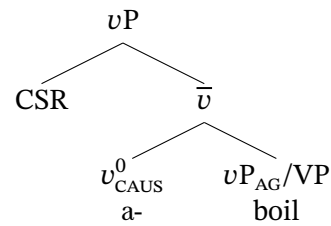
Is there a way to preserve the insight that [as-] is an amalgamated form while assuming a theory of argument structure in which the valency of a predicate is determined in the syntax (e.g., Pylkkänen

2008, Deal 2009)?

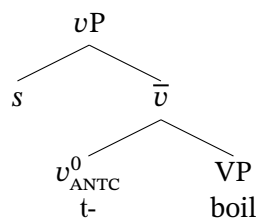
(32) *Transitive/
Agentive*



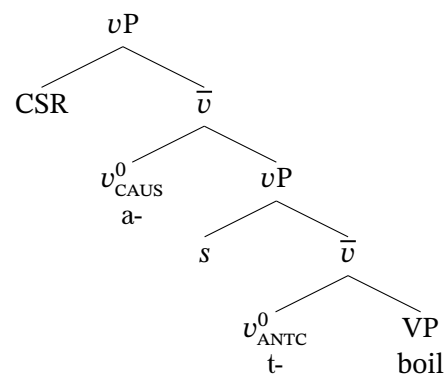
(34) *Direct
Causatives*



(33) *Inchoative
unaccusatives*



(35) *Indirect
Causatives*



Workneh (2019) presents a recent analysis wherein [a-] and [as-] are different causative morphemes.

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