

Factors for Hyperactivity in Tigrinya

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1 Introduction

(1) *expl* [_{IP} **ʔit-a səbajti ki-t-xəjjid**]
 that-FSG woman.F SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
ji-gibaʔ-(a)
 SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG
 ‘The woman needs to leave.’

- (2) ʔit-a məmh̩ir n=ət-om təmharo₁ [CP t₁
that-FSG teacher ACC=that-MPL student.MPL
ni-ki-xəjd-u] ti-dəl̩ij-om
COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL SM.3FSG-want.IPFV-OM.3MPL
‘The teacher wants the students to leave.’

Following a general overview of Tigrinya in §2, I will argue in §3 that these constructions involve two separate derivations. We will see that in (1) an embedded argument exceptionally controls object marking on the matrix predicate through a long-distance agreement relationship. In (2), on the other hand, an embedded argument exceptionally raises into a derived object position of the matrix predicate.

What makes both of these cases interesting is the fact that the relevant hyperactive behaviors are entirely optional. Thus, the hyperactive nominal must otherwise be fully licensed as an argument of the embedded clause. To the extent that this is correct, Tigrinya offers interesting insights into two particular questions regarding the factors responsible for hyperactive behaviors of nominal constituents.

The first concerns the factors that allow nominal constituents to engage in multiple A-relations. I will argue in §4 that the usual suspects, including Case-licensing and defective domains, which rely on the Activity Condition of Chomsky 2001, do not contribute to an explanatory and predictive account of hyperactivity patterns in Tigrinya. On the basis of the pervasiveness of hyperactivity in the language, I will suggest that this should be seen as the default state of nominal arguments (Bhatt 2005, Nevins 2005, Baker 2008, et seq.). Further work should therefore attempt to explain and predict nominal *hypo*activity, the inability for nominal arguments to engage in additional A-relations.

The second question concerns the factors that are responsible for determining why hyperactivity manifests differently in each construction, either as long-distance hyperagreement or hyperraising into the superordinate clause.¹ In

¹There are also significant questions regarding precisely how hyperactive constructions are derived. For example, movement to the edge of the embedded clause has been taken as a necessary component of both long-distance agreement (e.g., Bruening 2001; Polinsky & Potsdam 2001; Branigan & MacKenzie 2002) and hyperraising-to-object (e.g., Deal 2017; Zyman 2018; Fong 2019). While these issues are likely to inform the questions raised in the text, they are logically independent. That is, whatever makes a nominal argument capable of evacuating an embedded clause is separate from whether it actually does so. For this reason, and given the constraints on the manuscript, I will mostly be focusing on whether the hyperactive

§5 I will argue that hyperactivity patterns in Tigrinya are predictable on the basis of the argument structure of the matrix predicate. This correlation supports the idea that hyperactivity patterns can be motivated and explained by the properties of verbal functional heads in the superordinate clause. This idea fits into a larger body of emerging literature that similarly shifts attention away from the properties of nominal arguments or the embedded clause and refocuses it on the properties of the superordinate clause (Halpert 2019; Wurmbrand 2019; Lee & Yip 2024; Greeson 2025; Hammerly & Mathieu 2025; Mikkelsen et al. 2026). The paper concludes with §6.

2 Background on Tigrinya

2.1 Ethnographic information and data collection

Tigrinya is an Ethiosemitic language within the Afro-Asiatic language family. It is, therefore, closely related to the languages Tigré and Amharic and more distantly related to Arabic and Hebrew. Tigrinya is estimated to be spoken by 10 million people. Although the language is spoken primarily in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, large diaspora populations exist world-wide (Eberhard et al. 2024). The language is not currently considered endangered.

Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this paper were collected in individual interviews by the author. The interviews involved standard judgment tasks that asked the consultant to provide intuitions about the grammaticality or acceptability of utterances in Tigrinya. Test sentences were typically paired with contexts or translations to demonstrate the intended interpretation and to facilitate judgments. The primary consultant for the research reported here, who is proficient in English, is from the Tigray region of Northern Ethiopia and currently lives in Addis Ababa. With the notable exceptions of Tsehay (2009) and Niguss (2021), the non-trivial variation between dialects of Tigrinya remains under-explored.

2.2 Basic morphosyntax

Tigrinya is a fairly well-behaved SOV language with a strongly head-final verbal domain. Illustrative examples are provided below in (3).

nominal raises into the matrix, but not necessarily how this precedes. I will return to these issues briefly in §5, but otherwise leave them for future research (Overfelt in preparation).

- (3) a. jonas n=ət-a t'irmuz səbir-u-wa
Yonas.M ACC=that-FSG bottle.F break.PFV-SM.3MSG-OM.3FSG
'Yonas broke the bottle.'
- b. ʔit-a t'irmuz tə-səbir-a
that-FSG bottle INTR-break.PFV-SM.3FSG
'The bottle broke.'
- (Nazareth 2011: 56, (55))

As the examples above also serve to illustrate, Tigrinya is a nominative-accusative language with respect to both case-marking and agreement alignment. The grammatical subject of transitive and intransitive predicates is morphologically unmarked with nominative case and controls subject marking (SM) morphology on the predicate.

Grammatical objects are differentially marked with the accusative case pre-clitic *n(i)=* on the basis of factors like definiteness, specificity, and discourse prominence (Weldu 2004; Kievit & Kievit 2009; Nazareth 2011). As shown above, it is typical for accusative-marked nominals in mono-clausal structures to control object marking (OM) morphology. As further demonstrated in (4), it is also typical for an accusative-marked object to Object Shift to a predicate initial position (Overfelt 2022). Operations of topicalization and scrambling may place phrasal constituents in a clause-initial position. Notably, accusative case marking can be optional for highly topical objects, particularly when fronted.

- (4) a. ʔit-i təmaharaj k'olt'if-u dəbdabe ts'ihif-u
that-MSG student quickly-3MSG letter wrote.PFV-SM.3MSG
'The student quickly wrote a letter.'
- b. ʔit-i təmaharaj n=ət-a məts'haf₁ biqilt'uf t₁
DIST-MSG student ACC=DIST-FSG book quickly
ji-nbib-a ʔall-o
SM.3MSG-read.IPFV-OM.3FSG AUX.NPST-SM.3MSG
'The student is quickly reading the book.'
- c. ʔit-a məts'haf₁ ʔit-i təmaharaj biqilt'uf t₁
DIST-FSG book DIST-MSG student quickly
ji-nbib-a ʔall-o
SM.3MSG-read.IPFV-OM.3FSG AUX.NPST-SM.3MSG
'The student is quickly reading the book.'

In addition to subject and object agreement markers, verbs also host prefixal morphology that indicates finiteness, mood, valency alternations, and sub-

ordination relations. Prefixal subject markers with initial glide and laryngeal consonants are often deleted after other prefixes. For expository purposes, I will typically omit this information from interlinear glosses. Full agreement paradigms can be found on pages **xvii–xvii**.

3 Hyperactivity in Tigrinya

The empirical domain of the paper involves the clausal complements of pseudo-modal and intentional predicates. Of interest is the observation made in the introduction that a nominal constituent in these domains displays hyperactive behaviors, engaging in A-relations with both the embedded and matrix predicates. The following subsections will argue that this hyperactive behavior manifests differently in each construction. The complement of pseudo-modal predicates are transparent for long-distance AGREE (§3.1) while the complement of intensional predicates are transparent for Raising (§3.2).

3.1 Hyperagreement with pseudo-modal predicates

Pseudo-modal predicates, including the tri-consonantal root /gbʔ/ ‘need’ in (5), have been a focus of attention for Tesfay (2016), Gebregziabher (2021), Cacchioli & Overfelt (under review), and Overfelt & Cacchioli (accepted).

- (5) a. *expl* [_{IP} *ʔit-a* *səbajti* *ki-t-xəjjid*]
 that-FSG woman.F SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
 ji-gibaʔ
 SM.3MSG-need.IPFV
 ‘The woman needs to leave.’
 b. *expl* [_{IP} *ʔit-a* *səbajti* *ki-t-xəjjid*]
 that-FSG woman.F SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
 ji-gibaʔ-a
 SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG
 ‘The woman needs to leave.’

From a purely descriptive standpoint, the clausal complement of pseudo-modal predicates is marked with the subjunctive prefix *ki-* on the embedded predicate.² Other types of subordinating complementizer morphology is not permitted in

²See [Cacchioli 2026](#) for more in-depth discussion of the prefix *ki-* in Tigrinya.

these clauses (compare with the following section), which motivates treating them as IP constituents. The logical subject of these examples *?ita səbajti* ‘the woman’ necessarily controls subject marking on the embedded verb. This constituent may also optionally control object marking on the matrix pseudo-modal predicate. Subject marking on the matrix predicate is obligatorily a default 3MSG marker.

While analyses vary, *Cacchioli & Overfelt (under review)* and *Overfelt & Cacchioli (accepted)* propose the representations provided above. The logical subject *?ita səbajti* ‘the woman’ is generated as an argument of the embedded clause. Object marking on the matrix predicate in (5b) is argued to be the reflex of a formal AGREE relationship with the matrix v^0 (e.g., *Chomsky 2001*). This long-distance agreement relationship is fed by an application of scrambling to the edge of the embedded clause (e.g., *Polinsky & Potsdam 2001*). The default 3MSG subject marker on the pseudo-modal predicate indicates the absence of a referential grammatical subject in the matrix clause in addition to the unavailability of a Raising-to-Subject derivation.

Positional restrictions on the number-neutral bare nominal expression *səb* ‘person, people’ offer one indicator that hyperactive nominals in pseudo-modal constructions are generated within the embedded clause. Observe in (6) that *səb* can only be interpreted in the grammatical subject position of a clause. The use of *səb* in object positions is highly marked. Unlike typical bare nominals, object *seb* requires accusative case-marking. However, this form is still associated with a marked register, eliciting comments that it might be appropriate for poetic language, analogous to the expression “humankind” in English, but is not appropriate for every day conversation.

- (6) a. *səb pro həgiz-u-ni*
 person 1SG help.PFV-SM.3MSG-OM.1SG
 ‘Someone helped me.’
 b. *pro *(#ni=səb həgiz-e*
 1SG ACC=person help.PFV-SM.1SG
 ‘I helped someone.’

With this in mind, observe that *səb* grammatically and felicitously serves as the logical subject in a pseudo-modal construction:

- (7) *expl* [_{IP} səb ni=gəz-u ki-xəjjid]
 person LOC=house-POSS.3MSG SBJV-SM.3MSG.leave.IPFV
 ji-giboʔ-(o)
 SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3MSG
 ‘Someone needs to go to his house.’

This suggests that, despite its ability to control matrix object marking, the hyperactive nominal serves as the grammatical subject of the embedded clause and, therefore, is not generated as an object of the matrix clause.

A second indicator of the embedded origin of hyperactive nominals is found in their relative ordering with adverbials. In example (8) below, the adverbial modifier *ts’ibah* ‘tomorrow’ unambiguously modifies the embedded predicate, given its temporal incompatibility with matrix past tense. It is telling that this adverbial can precede the hyperactive nominal *?ita səbajti* ‘the woman’.

- (8) *expl* [_{IP} {ts’ibah} ?it-a səbajti {ts’ibah} ki-ti-xəjjid
 tomorrow DIST-FSG woman tomorrow SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
] ji-gibaʔ-a nəjr-u
 SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG AUX.PST-SM.3MSG
 ‘The woman needed to leave tomorrow.’

This suggests that *?ita səbajti* ‘the woman’ is a constituent of the embedded clause, which is made more compelling by data like (9). The inability for *ts’ibah* ‘tomorrow’ to appear clause-initially, before the grammatical subject of the matrix intensional predicate, reflects the dispreference in Tigrinya for the long-distance scrambling of adjuncts.³

- (9) {#ts’ibah} ?it-a məmhīr ?it-om təmhāro [_{CP} {ts’ibah}
 tomorrow DIST-FSG teacher DIST-MPL student.PL tomorrow
 ni-ki-xəjd-u] dəlij-a-tom
 COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL want.IPFV-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL
 nəjr-a
 AUX.PST-SM.3FSG
 ‘The teacher wanted the students to leave tomorrow.’

³Spadine (2020) observes that arguments also resist long-distance scrambling. But personal research suggests that this holds only for complement clauses with more highly articulated structures, including clausal complements marked with prefix *kəmzi-* that are investigated in Spadine 2020 and Cacchioli 2026.

Knowing that adjuncts resist long-distance scrambling, the ability for *ts'ibah* 'tomorrow' to appear utterance-initially in (8) supports an analysis whereby both the adjunct and *?ita sɔbajti* 'the woman' are constituents of the embedded clause.

A second aspect of the analysis in Overfelt & Cacchioli *accepted* is that the hyperactive nominal does not undergo Hyperraising-to-Object, and instead controls matrix object marking from an embedded position. The example in (8) above is consistent with this claim. In addition, the inability to mark the hyperactive nominal with accusative case suggests that that it is generated within and remains a constituent of the embedded clause:

- (10) **expl* n=ət-a səbajti [IP ki-ti-xəjjid]
ACC=DIST-FSG woman SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
ji-gibbaʔ-(a)
SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG
Intended: ‘The woman needs to leave.’

If there were a derived object position available to either generate or receive the hyperactive nominal in the matrix clause, the expectation would be that it could be marked with accusative case, contrary to fact.⁴

Instead, the hyperactive nominal in these constructions is marked with the morphological case that is appropriate for its grammatical role in the embedded clause. We see this clearly in sets of examples like those provided in (11) below.

- (11) a. $[_{IP} \text{ʔit-a} \quad \text{səbajti} \quad \text{n=ət-om} \quad \text{məts'ħaf-ti}$
 that-FSG woman ACC=that-MPL book-PL
 $\text{ki-ti-nbīb-om} \quad] \text{ji-gibaʔ-a}$
 SBJV-SM.3FSG-read.IPFV-OM.3MPL SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG
 ‘The woman needs to read the books.’
 b. $[_{IP} \text{ʔit-a} \quad \text{səbajti} \quad \text{n=ət-om} \quad \text{məts'ħaf-ti}$
 that-FSG woman ACC=that-MPL book-PL
 $\text{ki-ti-nbīb-om} \quad] \text{ji-gibaʔ-om}$
 SBJV-SM.3FSG-read.IPFV-OM.3MPL SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3MPL
 ‘The woman needs to read the books.’

⁴I argue in §5 that the matrix predicate */gbʔ/* is an unaccusative predicate. This further supports the claim that there is no accusative case assigning object position in the matrix clause to host the hyperactive nominal.

Given both a subject and object argument embedded under a pseudo-modal predicate, either of them is principle capable of controlling object marking in the matrix clause. Moreover, each nominal is appropriately unmarked for nominative case or marked for accusative case on the basis of its grammatical role as the subject or direct object in the embedded clause.

A final aspect of the analysis in *Overfelt & Cacchioli accepted* is that the exceptional object marking on the matrix predicate is fed by scrambling to the edge of the embedded clause. The descriptive lack of Minimality effects, which should otherwise be expected under a Raising-to-Object analysis, point toward this alternative account. It is on this basis, and on the basis of observable island sensitivity, intervention effects in ditransitives, and the inability to bleed disjoint-reference effects, that *Overfelt & Cacchioli (accepted)* conclude that A'-scrambling places nominal constituents in a sufficiently local relationship with the matrix v^0 to feed object agreement. Notably, this movement may proceed covertly in certain instances, particularly in examples like (11b).

3.2 Hyperraising-to-Object of intensional predicates

On the other hand, intensional predicates in Tigrinya like the tri-consonantal root /dlj/ ‘want’ below, have received relatively less attention.

- (12) a. ʔit-a məmħir $_{\text{CP}}$ ʔit-om təmharo
that-FSG teacher ACC=that-MPL student.MPL
 ni-ki-xəjd-u ti-dəlij
COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL SM.3FSG-want.IPFV
‘The teacher wants the students to leave.’
b. ʔit-a məmħir n=ət-om təmharo_1 $[\text{t}_1]$
that-FSG teacher ACC=that-MPL student.MPL
 ni-ki-xəjd-u ti-dəlij-om
COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL SM.3FSG-want.IPFV-OM.3MPL
‘The teacher wants the students to leave.’

Descriptively speaking, intensional predicates also take clausal complements whose predicate is marked with the familiar subjunctive *ki*-prefix. The embedded verb of these clausal complements may also carry the prefixal morpheme *ni*-, which I identify here as a complementizer, making these complement CPs. This element *ni*- surfaces as the outermost prefix on the verb and is generally op-

tional, its inclusion being linked to more “formal” ways of speaking.⁵ The logical subject of the embedded clause, *?itom tāmharo* ‘the students’ in these examples, controls subject marking on the embedded verb. Optionally, this argument may also carry accusative case-marking, in which case it also controls object marking on the matrix predicate.

Overfelt & Cacchioli (accepted) conclude that these examples are similarly derived by way of a scrambling-fed long-distance hyperagreement relationship. On the basis of new data, I will argue that these constructions are derived via Hyperraising-to-Object, which is both optional and may possibly occur covertly in some instances (see Chen 2018; Lohninger 2024, and references therein).

On this analysis of the examples in (12), the logical subject of the embedded clause *?itom tāmharo* ‘those students’ is generated as an argument of the embedded clause where it triggers expected agreement on the embedded predicate and, by hypothesis, receives structural Case. As an instance of Raising, object agreement on the matrix predicate is fed by movement of *?itom tāmharo* ‘those students’, as the structurally highest argument, to a derived object position in the matrix clause. Like typical Object Shift in the language, this correlates with the valuation of the ϕ -features determining the shape of the object marker on the predicate as well as accusative case-marking.

Knowing the distribution of the number-neutral bare-nominal *səb* ‘person, people’, examples like (13) suggest that the logical subject of the embedded predicate can serve as the grammatical subject of the embedded clause, particularly in the case that it does not control matrix object marking.⁶

- (13) *?it-a səbajti [səb ki-Ø-xəjjid] ti-dəlij*
 that-FSG woman person SBJV-SM.3MSG-leave.IPFV SM.3FSG-want.IPFV
 ‘The woman wants people to leave.’

Hyperactive nominals in constructions with intensional predicates also behave like constituents of the embedded clause with respect to their ordering with modifiers. In example (14) the hyperactive nominal *?itom tāmharo* ‘those

⁵The reader might note that this supposed complementizer is similar in several ways to the accusative case marker. While it is conceivable that the *ni-* on subjunctive complement clauses is accusative case, this would conflict with the fact that these clauses otherwise fail to display object-like properties; see Overfelt in preparation.

⁶There is a possible variant of this sentence in which bare *səb* controls object agreement, but it again takes on the marked meaning of “humankind” that we saw arises when *səb* serves as an object.

students' can follow the adverb *ts'ibah* 'tomorrow', which we know modifies the embedded predicate from within the embedded clause.

- (14) ?it-i məmhir [CP *ts'ibah* ?it-om təmharo
 that-MSG teacher tomorrow that-MPL student.PL
 ki-xəjd-u] delij-at-(??om)
 SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL SM.3MSG-want.IPFV-OM.3MPL
 nəjr-a
 AUX.PST-SM.3FSG
 'The teacher wanted the students to leave tomorrow.'

In this position the hyperactive nominal is unmarked with nominative case and only marginally controls matrix object marking.⁷ This, in turn, suggests that *?itom təmharo* 'those students' is generated as an argument of the embedded verb.

When the hyperactive nominal does carry accusative marking, however, we can see from the pair of examples in (15) that it is no longer possible for it to follow the unambiguously embedded adverb.

- (15) a. *?it-i məmhir [CP *ts'ibah* n=ət-om təmharo
 that-MSG teacher tomorrow ACC=DIST-MPL student.PL
 ki-xəjd-u] delij-at-(om)
 SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL SM.3MSG-want.IPFV-OM.3MPL
 nəjr-a
 AUX.PST-SM.3FSG
 'The teacher wanted the students to leave tomorrow.'
- b. ?it-a məmhir n=ət-om təmharo₁ [CP *t₁ ts'ibah*
 that-FSG teacher ACC=DIST-MPL student tomorrow
 ki-xəjd-u] delij-at-om
 SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL want.PFV-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL
 nəjr-a
 AUX.PST-SM.3FSG
 'The teacher wanted the students to leave tomorrow.'

It becomes necessary in this instance for the hyperactive nominal to precede the adverbial. This is consistent with the claim that accusative case is tied to a

⁷It is observations of this type that contribute to the suspicion that Hyperraising-to-Object may not always be realized in the surface string.

derived position in the matrix clause, as postulated by a Hyperraising-to-Object derivation.

This interpretation of the data is corroborated by the fact that the logical subject of the embedded predicate shows other behaviors that are characteristic of occupying a grammatical object position in the matrix. For instance, when the context makes clear that the adverb *timali* ‘yesterday’ modifies the matrix predicate, the accusative-marked hyperactive nominal can appear in a preceding position, where it controls object marking on the matrix verb.

- (16) *ʔit-a məmħir n=ət-om təmħaro timali* [_{CP} *t*₁
 that-FSG teacher ACC=that-MPL student yesterday
ki-xəjd-u] *delij-ət-om nəjr-a*
 SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL want.PFV-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL AUX.PST-SM.3FSG
 ‘The teacher wanted yesterday for the students to leave.’

Additionally, like true objects, the logical subject of the embedded predicate can be promoted to matrix subject when the intensional predicate is passivized, as shown in (17a). In this example, *ʔitom təmħaro* ‘those students’ controls subject marking on the matrix predicate and surfaces to the left of the demoted agent *biti məmħir* ‘by the teacher’. These are properties that one would expect from promotion to the grammatical subject position of the matrix clause.

- (17) a. *ʔit-om təmħaro₁ b=it-i məmħir* [_{CP} *t*₁
 DIST-MPL student.PL INS=that-MSG teacher
ni-ki-xəjd-u] *tə-dəlįj-om*
 COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL INTR-want.PFV-SM.3MPL
 ‘The students are wanted by the teacher to leave.’
 b. **n=ət-om təmħaro₁ b=it-i məmħir* [_{CP} *t*₁
 ACC-DIST-MPL student.PL INS=that-MSG teacher
ni-ki-xəjd-u] *tə-dəlįj-om*
 COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL INTR-want.PFV-SM.3MPL
 ‘The students are wanted by the teacher to leave.’

The inability for the hyperactive nominal to be accusative case-marked in (17b) further suggests that accusative case is assigned by the matrix predicate, as opposed to some element of the embedded clause. Together, these observations suggest that the hyperactive nominal, at some point in the derivation, occupies

the the matrix object position and is it in this position that it receives accusative case.

Finally, we find evidence for a difference in the mechanism responsible for feeding object marking on an intensional predicate. Descriptively, matrix object marking only cross-references the structurally highest embedded argument, namely the grammatical subject. As these data in (18) show, it is not possible for the grammatical object of the embedded clause to control matrix object marking, regardless of where it is pronounced.

- (18) a. *ʔit-i məmhɪr [CP ʔit-om təmharo n=ət-a mətɓ'ħaf
that-MSG teacher that-MPL student.PL ACC=that-FSG book
ki-nbib-u-wa] ji-dəlɟ-a
SBJV-read.IPFV-SM.3MPL-OM.3FSG SM.3MSG-want.IPFV-OM.3FSG
‘The teacher wants the students to read the book.’
- b. *ʔit-i məmhɪr n=ət-a mətɓ'ħaf ʔit-om təmharo t₁
that-MSG teacher ACC=that-FSG book that-MPL student.PL
ki-nbib-u-wa ji-dəlɟ-a
SBJV-read.IPFV-SM.3MPL-OM.3FSG SM.3MSG-want.IPFV-OM.3FSG
‘The teacher wants the students to read the book.’

These Minimality effects distinguish the mechanism for hyperactivity here from what we observed in the previous subsection. They are also expected given the typical A-movement operation that is supposed to generate Raising configurations.⁸

4 Non-predictive and non-explanatory factors for hyperactivity

The theoretical questions that arise at this point are what permits hyperactivity in Tigrinya and what determines whether it manifests as hyperagreement or hyperraising.

There is a history of accounting for patterns of (non-)hyperactivity that is built upon the idea that nominal constituents must be licensed by formal syntac-

⁸As Lohninger (2024) and the literature referenced there discuss in detail, the difference in the relevant mechanism may also lie in the composition of the probes that drive the observed movement. This issue must be left for future research, though see §5.

tic features, notably including Case (Vergnaud 1977/2008, et seq.). An influential implementation of this idea, which has its origin in Chomsky 2001, holds that nominal constituents become inaccessible to additional agreement relations and A-movement upon being licensed, as per the condition in (19):

- (19) *Generalized Activity Condition* (adapted from Chomsky 2001: 6)
A nominal constituent that is formally licensed is inactive.
An inactive nominal constituent is not accessible to A-relations.

This approach opens the door for hypothesizing that certain syntactic domains, which are deficient on some measure, are defective, meaning that nominals may fail to be licensed. Other approaches propose that Case may not be a relevant feature for licensing and deactivating nominals.⁹

I will argue that accounts of (non-)hyperactivity that rely on nominal-licensing or concepts of clausal defectiveness do not provide an explanation for the patterns of hyperactivity in Tigrinya. Moreover, Tigrinya offers compelling evidence that such concepts fail to predict patterns of hyperactivity cross-linguistically. These observations will motivate the conclusion that the Activity Condition does not productively contribute to an understanding of hyperactivity in Tigrinya and beyond (e.g., Bhatt 2005; Nevins 2005; see also Baker 2008).

4.1 Against deactivation by Case-licensing

The prevalence of hyperactivity in Bantu languages, coupled with a persistent lack of evidence for Case-licensing, has given rise to the hypothesis that Case is not a relevant factor in the licensing of nominal constituents, at least in a particular set of those languages (Carstens 2011; Diercks 2012; Carstens & Diercks 2013; see also Van der Wal 2015; Sheehan & van der Wal 2018). Supposing that the same were true for Tigrinya, hyperactivity patterns could be understood as the reflex of the absence of a deactivating feature for nominals.

This is a position that Overfelt & Cacchioli (accepted) have previously argued against. As they note, Tigrinya is like other Ethiosemitic and Semitic languages in showing several indicators of being a Case-licensing language (see especially Weldu 2004 and Nazareth 2011). There are environments in which nominal constituents must be marked with specific morphology, undergo displace-

⁹See Zyman 2023, Lohninger 2024, and Fong & Halpert to appear for overviews of the empirical and theoretical landscape of hyperactivity.

ment, or both. These are precisely the kinds of morphosyntactic behaviors that traditional Case-Theory is intended to explain (Vergnaud 1977/2008; Chomsky 1981; see Sheehan & van der Wal 2018 for discussion).

The existence of Object Shift, which was demonstrated in section §2.2 offers a case in point. The behavior of nominal arguments in the passive alternation in (20) also points toward the requirement for traditional Case-licensing.

- (20) a. **ʔit-i təmaharaj n=ət-a dəbdabe**
that-MSG student ACC=that-FSG book
ts'ihif-u-wa
write.PFV-SM.3MSG-OM.3FSG
'The student wrote the letter.'
- b. **ʔit-a dəbdabe b=it-i təmaharaj tə-ts'ahif-a**
that-FSG letter INS=that-MSG student INTR-write.PFV-SM.3FSG
'The letter was written by the student.'

In the passive variant in (20b), the demoted agent argument becomes optional. When it does appear, it is necessarily marked with the preposition *b(i)=* and typically appears at the edge of the predicate.

Now consider again the Tigrinya examples repeated below. Nominal constituents of the embedded clauses, which are eligible for additional A-relations, are appropriately case-marked and licensed within the embedded clause. Moreover, hyperactivity is not a Case discriminating phenomenon in the language (see Bhatt 2005; Bobaljik 2008). Arguments that are otherwise unmarked with nominative case or marked accusative case can engage in multiple A-relations.

- (21) [_{IP} **ʔit-a səbajti n=ət-om mətə'haf-ti**
that-FSG woman ACC=that-MPL book-PL
ki-ti-nbīb-om] **ji-giba?-(om)**
SBJV-SM.3FSG-read.IPFV-OM.3MPL SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3MPL
'The woman needs to read the book.'

- (22) ʔit-i məmhir [CP ts'ibah ʔit-om təmharo
 that-MSG teacher tomorrow that-MPL student.PL
 ki-xəjd-u] delij-ət
 SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL SM.3MSG-want.IPFV-OM.3MPL
 nəjr-a
 AUX.PST-SM.3FSG
 'The teacher wanted the students to leave tomorrow.'

This suggests that it is not possible to develop an explanatory theory of why hyperactivity is possible in Tigrinya purely by appealing to Case and Case-licensing. That is, given the optionality of hyperactivity, it does not appear that hyperactive behaviors reflect an inability to Case-license a nominal within the embedded clause. Similarly, this does not appear to be factor suited to explain whether we observe hyperagreement or hyperraising seeing as embedded nominals are appropriately Case-licensed in both constructions.¹⁰

Additionally, it does not appear that Case and Case-licensing contribute to a predictive theory of which languages display nominal hyperactivity. We observe hyperactivity in Tigrinya despite it behaving like a Case-licensing language, such as English, which exemplifies non-hyperactive languages. Thus, being a Case-licensing language does not determine that a language will resist hyperactive behaviors (see also Baker 2008). These results add to previous conclusions that should push us away from theories of hyperactivity that rely on Case or Case-licensing (see Carstens & Diercks 2013 and Bantu languages, Keine 2018 on Hindi-Urdu, Bešlin 2022 on Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian).

4.2 Against defective domains and non-deactivation

Building on Chomsky (1981; 2000), a more traditional line of analyses proposes that the accessibility of a nominal constituent for A-relations is predictable on the basis of the defectiveness of syntactic domains. The idea is that certain syntactic heads may be defective by virtue of being featurally incomplete. The correlation between featural deficiency and nominal activity motivates the assertion that, among the other defective properties of such heads, is the inability to license, and thereby deactivate, nominal constituents. We will look at two such proposals only to find that they neither explains nor predicts hyperactivity patterns in

¹⁰ As a reviewer notes, it could be the case that Raising only targets unmarked nominative Case (e.g., Kornfilt & Preminger 2015). This alone, however, does not offer an explanation for why unmarked nominals cannot undergo Raising from under pseudo-modal predicates.

Tigrinya.

4.2.1 Partial agreement and defectiveness

Defectiveness may reflect deficient specification for ϕ -features, including person, number, and gender. Nunes (2008) and Ferreira (2009), building on a suggestion by Chomsky (2000), offer analyses in this spirit for hyperraising in Brazilian Portuguese, shown in (23).

- (23) **o João₁ disse** [que *t*₁ **comprou** um carro]
 the João said.3SG that bought.3SG a car
 ‘João said that he bought a car.’ (Nunes 2008: 87, (4))

The embedded predicate *comprou* ‘bought’ partially agrees with *o João*, showing morphology that is specified for person and number, but not gender. This motivates the hypothesis that the T^0 of the embedded clause in the example above is ϕ -incomplete. It is, therefore, defective and leaves *o João* accessible to A-relations in the matrix clause.

The agreement paradigms for the subject and object markers in Tigrinya are adapted from Leslau 1941 and presented respectively in Table 1 and Table 2. Both paradigms show (almost) entirely non-syncretic morphological forms for each combination of ϕ -features within any given aspectual verb form.¹¹

Table 1: Subject marker paradigms by aspectual verb form in Tigrinya

Subject	Imperfective	Perfective	Perfect
SM.3MSG	ji -səbbir	səbir- u	səbər-ə
SM.3MPL	ji -səbir- u	səbir- om	səbər- u
SM.3FSG	ti -səbbir	səbir- a	səbər- ət
SM.3FPL	ji -səbir- a	səbir- ən	səbər- a
SM.2MSG	ti -səbbir	səbir- ka	səbər- ka
SM.2MPL	ti -səbir- u	səbir- kum	səbər- kum
SM.3FSG	ti -səbir- i	səbir- ki	səbər- ki
SM.3FPL	ti -səbir- a	səbir- kin	səbər- kin
SM.1SG	ʔi -səbbir	səbir-ə	səbər- ku
SM.1PL	ni -səbbir	səbir- na	səbər- na

¹¹The one instance of syncretism is found in Table 1 between the 3FSG and 2MSG subject marker in the imperfective.

Table 2: Object marker paradigms by aspectual verb form in Tigrinya

Object	Imperfective	Perfective	Perfect
OM.3MSG	ji-k'ətl- o	k'ətil-u- wo	k'ətəl-Ø- o
OM.3MPL	ji-k'ətl- om	k'ətil-u- wom	k'ətəl-Ø- om
OM.3FSG	ji-k'ətl- a	k'ətil-u- wa	k'ətəl-Ø- a
OM.3FPL	ji-k'ətl- ən	k'ətil-u- wən	k'ətəl-Ø- ən
OM.2MSG	ji-k'ətlə- kka	k'ətil-u- kka	k'ətəl-ə- kka
OM.2MPL	ji-k'ətlə- kkum	k'ətil-u- kkum	k'ətəl-ə- kkum
OM.2FSG	ji-k'ətlə- kki	k'ətil-u- kki	k'ətəl-ə- kki
OM.2FPL	ji-k'ətlə- kkin	k'ətil-u- kin	k'ətəl-ə- kin
OM.1SG	ji-k'ətlə- nni	k'ətil-u- nni	k'ətəl-ə- nni
OM.1PL	ji-k'ətlə- nna	k'ətil-u- nna	k'ətəl-ə- nna

In cases of hyperactivity in Tigrinya, provided again below, an argument of the embedded clause controls non-syncretic, ϕ -complete agreement on both the embedded predicate and the matrix predicate.

- (24) *expl* [_{IP} **ʔit-om təmharo ki-Ø-xəjd-u**]
that-MPL student.PL SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL
ji-giboʔ-om
SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG
‘The students need to leave.’

- (25) **ʔit-i məmħir n=ət-om təmharo₁** [_{CP} **t₁**
that-FSG teacher ACC=that-MPL students
ni-ki-Ø-xəjd-u] **ji-dəlj-om**
COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL SM.3FSG-want.IPFV-OM.3MPL
‘The teacher wants the students to leave.’

Here, too, it is not clear that a theory of defectiveness that is built on the completeness of ϕ -features can provide an explanatory account for hyperactivity in Tigrinya. There is no obvious subset of ϕ -features expressed in the language that can plausibly be said to be absent from the embedded clause to result in deficiency. Moreover, this is true in both constructions, meaning that this is also not obviously the factor that determines whether we observe hyperagreement or hyperraising.

Given this conclusion, it is also unclear that ϕ -feature incompleteness of-

fers a predictive account of hyperactivity cross-linguistically. While hyperactivity may arise in Brazilian Portuguese due to purported ϕ -incomplete agreement, hyperactivity in Tigrinya arises even in the context of ϕ -complete agreement. Thus, Tigrinya adds to previous results that speak against theories of (non-)hyperactivity that rely on the ϕ -completeness of licensing heads (see also Carstens 2001; 2011 on Bantu languages).

4.2.2 Tenselessness and defectiveness

Defectiveness has also been claimed to be a property of an embedded T^0 that is not specified for semantic tense. Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1999) offer this account for instances of Greek hyperraising below.

(26) *Hyperraising in Greek*

Ta pedhia arxisan [na trexoun (*avrio)]
the children started.3PL SBJV run.3PL tomorrow

lit. ‘The children started [to run (*tomorrow)].’

(Zyman 2023: 33–34, (10)–(11))

The nominal constituent *ta pedhia* ‘the children’ controls agreement in the embedded clause while at the same time Raising to the matrix subject position where it controls matrix subject agreement. These properties emerge in the context of embedded subjunctive clauses, which notably do not permit tense adverbs that specify a time different from the matrix time of evaluation. This is taken as evidence that the embedded clause is not independently semantically specified for tense. By hypothesis, this defect prevents the embedded T^0 from licensing and deactivating an embedded argument, thereby leaving it accessible to additional A-relations in the matrix clause.

The relevant *ki*-marked subjunctive complement clauses in Tigrinya, however, do permit for temporal adverbials that refer to a time that is different from the the time of evaluation for the matrix clause; recall the examples below.

- (27) [IP ?it-a səbajti ts’ibaħ ki-t-xəjjid]
that-FSG woman tomorrow SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
ji-giba?-a nəjr-u
SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG AUX.PST-SM.3MSG
‘The woman needed to leave tomorrow.’

- (28) ʔit-a məmhír n=ət-om təmharo₁ [CP t₁ ts'ibah̃
 that-FSG teacher ACC=that-MPL student tomorrow
 ki-xejd-u] delij-ət-om nəjr-a
 SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL want.PFV-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL AUX.PST-SM.3FSG
 'The teacher wanted the students to leave tomorrow.'

Importantly, we find nominal hyperactivity in both constructions alongside this evidence for semantically expressed tense in the embedded clause. Thus, a theory of defectiveness that is built on the grammatical feature of tense does not appear to be suited to provide an explanatory account for the fact that we observe hyperactivity in Tigrinya. Familiar reasoning suggests that it also will not explain why hyperactivity should manifest differently across the two constructions.¹²

Just as we have seen above, it would seem that the expression of tense also does not serve as a predictive factor for hyperactivity cross-linguistically. In Greek we observed hyperactivity in the absence of semantic tense while its presence permits hyperactivity in Tigrinya. These results support previously reached conclusions against theories of hyperactivity that rely on the expression of tense (see also Zeller 2006 on Zulu).¹³

5 Argument structure alternations predict hyperactivity

The major result of the preceding discussion is that the subjunctive complement clauses are not deficient on any measure that would lead us to expect that they cannot license nominal constituents. This suggests that concepts of defectiveness and nominal deactivation do not contribute to an understanding of why we observe hyperactivity in Tigrinya. Therefore, regarding the ques-

¹²For full disclosure, Cacchioli & Overfelt (under review) demonstrate that subjunctive complement clauses are unable to host tense-expressing auxiliaries. Thus, one might suppose that this morphosyntactic deficiency is responsible for nominal hyperactivity. Although space precludes a full discussion of this issue, nominal hyperactivity can be observed in the presence of tense auxiliaries that appear in indicative *kəmzi*-marked complement clauses. Thus, morphosyntactic tense and grammatical mood also appear to be grammatical factors that are neither explanatory nor predictive of hyperactivity in Tigrinya (see Overfelt in preparation).

¹³Boran Kim (pers. comm.) notes that aspect could potentially serve as a defective category in Tigrinya. The fact that subjunctive complements only appear with imperfective verb forms could be taken to motivate the hypothesis that imperfective aspect is defective. While present space precludes a full demonstration, indicative clauses are compatible with other verbal aspects, which also permit hyperactive behaviors. Thus, aspect is also an unlikely candidate for providing an explanatory theory of the hyperactivity facts in Tigrinya.

tion of why Tigrinya permits hyperactivity, I propose that we view these results as evidence that hyperactivity reflects the default state of nominal constituents (Bhatt 2005, Nevins 2005, Baker 2008, et seq.). This leads to the question of what actually is responsible for the patterns of hyperactivity in Tigrinya and cross-linguistically.

On the basis of the data examined thus far, the reader might note that the presence of the complementizer *n(i)*- is correlated with hyperraising while its absence is correlated with hyperagreement. Thus, one might suspect that features of this element, such as the properties of its movement probes (see Lohninger 2024 and references), are the explanatory factor for the observed hyperactivity patterns. While this might offer an explanation for how hyperagreement and hyperraising are derived, this alone does not obviously explain why movement must proceed to a derived object position of /dlj/ ‘want’. It also does not explain why hyperraising cannot be observed with /gbʔ/ ‘need’, at least not without appealing to differences in the selectional properties of the predicates.

Instead, I would propose that the selectional properties of these predicates are in fact the explanatory factors for hyperactivity in Tigrinya. This is based on the observation that hyperactivity patterns in Tigrinya are predictable on the basis of the argument structure of the matrix predicate. The intensional predicate /dlj/ ‘want’ is a transitive predicate, as evidenced by the ability to undergo passivization. However, as Cacchioli & Overfelt (under review) observe, the *ki*-clause selecting pseudo-modal /gbʔ/ ‘need’ shows several indicators of being an unaccusative predicate.

An initial piece of evidence to this effect, which was originally observed by Tesfay (2016), is found in the morphological form of the predicates. The imperfective form of the verb /gbʔ/, which is shown in isolation in (29), has the templatic shape CiC(C)aC. This is the expected form of intransitive members of its verb class. This contrasts with the transitive /dlj/ ‘want’, which shares the templatic shape CəC(C)iC with paradigmatic transitive verbs, such as /sbr/ ‘break’ in Table 1.

(29) *Imperfective of /gbʔ/*

ji-gibbaʔ

SM.3MSG-need.IPFV

(30) *Imperfective of /dlj/*

ji-dəlli

SM.3MSG-want.IPFV

The unaccusative argument structure of /gbʔ/ is also reflected in the obligatorily default 3MSG subject agreement that was identified in §3.1. It is not pos-

sible to interpret these structures with a referential subject, nor is it possible to overtly provide one in the way that is attempted with *nissu* ‘he’ in (31):

- (31) (**nissu*) [IP *?it-a səbajti ki-t-xəjjid*]
 3MSG.NOM that-FSG woman SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
ji-giba?-a
 SM.3MSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG
 Intended: ‘He needs the woman to leave.’

These are properties that partially follow from the unaccusativity of */gb?/*. The lack of an external theta-role means that */gb?/* cannot introduce a referential argument for the grammatical subject position without incurring a violation of the Θ -Criterion (Chomsky 1981).

The default subject agreement that appears on the pseudo-modal verb requires slightly more discussion. As the example in (32) shows, the logical subject *?ita səbajti* ‘the woman’ of a pseudo-modal construction cannot control matrix subject marking.

- (32) **?it-a səbajti*₁ [IP *t₁ ki-t-xəjjid*]
 that-FSG woman.F SBJV-SM.3FSG-leave.IPFV
ti-gibba?-(a)
 SM.3FSG-need.IPFV-OM.3FSG
 ‘The woman needs to leave.’

This reveals that these constructions permit only expletive subjects in the matrix clause, meaning that the Raising-to-Subject derivation that is represented in (32) must be unavailable. Instead, as argued in §3.1, hyperagreement in pseudo-modal constructions necessarily arises via long-distance hyperagreement.

This fact led Overfelt & Cacchioli (accepted) to speculate that there is no Raising in Tigrinya. However, accepting the argument that the intensional predicate */dlj/* ‘want’ of §3.2 permits Raising-to-Object derivations, this claim would be too strong. It would even be too strong to claim that there is a prohibition specifically against Raising-to-Subject in Tigrinya. We have observed a Raising-to-Subject derivation in the context of a passivized intensional predicate in the repeated example below:

- (33) **ʔit-om təmharo₁ b=it-i məmħir** [_{CP} **t₁**
 that-MPL student.PL INS=that-MSG teacher
ni-ki-xəjd-u] **tə-dəlɨj-om**
 COMP-SBJV-leave.IPFV-SM.3MPL INTR-want.PFV-SM.3MPL
 ‘The students are wanted by the teacher to leave.’

Putting together the conclusions that have been reached here and in the previous sections, it is possible to characterize the empirical landscape for the hyperactivity patterns that we observe with complement *ki*-clauses in Tigrinya as follows:

- (34) *The hyperactivity patterns of ki-clauses in Tigrinya*
 a. Transitive predicates show Hyperraising-to-Object.
 b. Passivized transitive predicates show Hypreraising-to-Subject.
 c. Unaccusative predicates show Hyperagreement.

In short, the hyperactive behavior of nominal constituents embedded in *ki*-clause complements appears to be predictable on the basis of the argument structure of the embedding predicate.

This is a way of characterizing the hyperactivity patterns in Tigrinya that modern theories of argument structure alternations are well-suited to handle. In particular, we can start from the assumption that an inventory of functional verbalizing v^0 heads, or possibly a series of such heads, are responsible for syntactically encoding the argument structure properties of the predicate (Kratzer 1996; Chomsky 2000; Pylkkänen 2008; Alexiadou et al. 2015 and numerous others).

This makes it possible to propose that v^0 heads in Tigrinya vary on the basis of their specification for at least two different types of morphosyntactic features to deliver the inventory in Table 3.

Table 3: An inventory of verbal functional heads and the effect on derivations in Tigrinya

v_{TRAN}^0	[EPP , ϕ]	Hyperraising-to-Object
v_{PASS}^0	[EPP]	Hyperraising-to-Subject
v_{UNAC}^0	[ϕ]	Hyperagreement

One of these features is a movement-licensing feature, such as an EPP feature in any of its modern instantiations. This feature could be seen as the motivating

factor for shifting arguments into a derived object position and, thereby, driving Raising derivations for transitive and passivized predicates. The absence of this feature from an unaccusative predicate reflects the absence of the derived object position, which in turns reflects the absence of accusative case. The second type of feature, which reflects fairly standard beliefs about object agreement, is a set of ϕ -features (e.g., Baker & Kramer 2018; van der Wal 2018). The presence of this set of features determines that agreement accompanies movement in the case of a transitive predicate or that an unaccusative predicate simply agrees with an embedded argument.

Available space precludes providing an articulated model of precisely how this kind of variation would deliver the intended the results. However, the hope is that these suggestions might lay the groundwork for future exploration (e.g., Overfelt in preparation).

6 Conclusion

This paper has investigated patterns of nominal hyperactivity in the context of subjunctive *ki*-clause complements in Tigrinya. I have have argued that these patterns are neither explained nor predicted by analyses that rely on concepts such as nominal-licensing and nominal deactivation. In short, nominals remain active for additional A-relations despite the fact that they are fully licensed in domains that otherwise are not defective in any obvious sense.

Instead, I proposed that the relevant feature for predicting the nature of hyperactivity patterns in Tigrinya is the argument structure of an embedding predicate. I suggested that this could be modeled using theoretical features commonly associated with verbal functional heads. This idea falls in line with an emerging literature that has similarly concluded that constraints on A-relations do not necessarily reflect factors involved in the licensing of nominal constituents or properties of the embedded clause. Instead, patterns of hyperactivity more generally reflects the properties of the superordinate clause and how these interact with the embedded clause and the arguments within (Halpert 2019; Wurmbbrand 2019; Lee & Yip 2024; Greeson 2025; Hammerly & Mathieu 2025; Mikkelsen et al. 2026).

Abbreviations

1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, ACC = accusative, AUX = auxiliary verb, COMP = complementizer, DIST = distal, F = feminine, INS = instrumental, INTR = intransitive, IPFV = imperfective, LOC = locative, M = masculine, NOM = nominative, NPST = non-past, OM = object marker, PFV = perfective, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PST = past, SBJV = subjunctive, SG = singular, SM = subject marker.

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