Internal Grammar in Amharic Place-Names

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Most MORPHOSYNTACTIC STUDIES OF English names have concentrated on external grammatical relationships. In his excellent monograph *On Defining the Proper Name*, John Algeo has cited the three morphosyntactic characteristics distinguishing proper names from common nouns:[1]

(1) proper names are not used in the plural;
(2) proper names are used without articles;
(3) proper names do accept restrictive relative clauses.

However, these are external characteristics applying to the name as a unit. Studies of the internal grammar in proper names of more than one constituent are less developed.

Vivian Zinkin has examined multi-constituent place-names with respect to generic and specific constituents.[2] In Zinkin's sample the generic noun is actually present in most of the names, e.g., *Long Swamp*. There are only a few examples where the true generic has been suppressed. They involve adjective-noun constructions, which do not require connective morphology in English. The three examples in Zinkin's sample reflect the adjective-noun order most common in English syntax.

Ethiopian place-names offer an interesting opportunity to examine internal grammar. For this study I have chosen a set of two-constituent place-names. The more than 50 forms included are primarily Amharic, the official national language, although their location is not confined to Amharic-speaking areas. Many of these names were assigned within the last two centuries. Sometimes an old place-name from an indigenous language exists side-by-side with the Amharic form, e.g., *Debre Zeyt*, which is also known by its older Cushitic name *Bishoftu*, especially

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1 John Algeo, *On Defining the Proper Name* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1973), p. 11.

2 Vivian Zinkin, "The Syntax of Place-Names," *Names*, 17:3 (September, 1969), 181-98.

among older people. The political ascendancy of Amharic is a major factor in the choice of names for newly emerging urban areas. Most of the names in the sample here refer to towns, districts, or mountains. Only a few are lakes or rivers: 3, 4, 5, and 12.

These names have been gathered from a wide range of sources: Ethiopian government documents, accounts of early European travelers and missionaries in Ethiopia, and an information booklet for Peace Corps volunteers.[3] In Romanizing them I have used a system which only approximates the phonetic value of each phoneme. First order vowels are indicated by /ə/ and sixth order by /ɨ/. The series of voiceless ejectives is represented by /p'/, /t'/, /k'/, /č'/, /s'/. Romanization of the Ethiopic writing system is not standardized, especially in non-linguistic publications. Therefore, readers who are familiar with maps of Ethiopia may find the spellings unfamiliar, e.g., many maps show *Addis Abebe* or *Addis Ababa* for the capital city. In this study the form will be addis abəbə.

The overwhelming majority of the sample consists of noun-noun constructions. Less than half of them include the generic noun.

Specific-Generic

1. bəgə mɨdɨr	sheep + CSM* + land
2. šɨwa medə	shoa + field
3. maryam wɨha	Mary + water
4. maryam šəwito	Mary + riverlet
5. č'əw bahɨr	salt + sea

Generic-Specific

6. dəbrə libanos	mountain + CSM + saint's name
7. dəbrə s'əhay	mountain + CSM + sun
8. dəbrə nəgodgwad	mountain + CSM + thunder
9. dəbrə sina	mountain + CSM + Sinai
10. dəbrə wərk'	mountain + CSM + gold
11. məkanə sələm	mountain + CSM + peace
12. may fərəs	brook + horse

* Construct state marker.

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3 Chamber of Commerce, *Guide Book of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Chamber of Commerce, 1954); Maps prepared by the Imperial Ethiopia Mapping and Geography Institute, 1965, 1966; Robert Ernest Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile* (1936, rpt. London: Frank Cass, 1968); *The Journals of C.W. Isenberg and J.L. Krapf* (London: Seely, Burnside, and Seely, 1834); Thomas Parkenham, *The Mountain of Rasselas* (New York: Reynal, 1959); Carl Jaffee, ed., *Town Reports* (Addis Ababa: Peace Corps/Ethiopia, 1967).

In place-names which have suppressed the primary generic noun, the remaining two nouns occur in both generic-specific order and specific-generic order.

Zero Generic: Generic-Specific

13. hagərə səlam	country + CSM + peace
14. agərə hɨwət	country + CSM + life, existence
15. agərə maryam	country + CSM + Mary
16. amba səlam	plateau + peace
17. ayn amba	eye + plateau
18. t'is abbay	smoke + Abbay (river name)
19. t'is ɨsat	smoke + fire
20. mizan təfəri	measure + Teferi[4]
21. gɨndə brət	log + CSM + iron
22. gɨlgɨl abbay	separation + Abbay (river name)
23. dəbrə bɨrhan	mountain + CSM + light
24. dəbrə mark'os	mountain + CSM + saint's
25. dəbrə zəyt	mountain + CSM + olive
26. asbə təfəri	thought + CSM + Teferi
27. gənətə maryam	garden + CSM + Mary
28. durə ǰala	forest + CSM + Jala (mountain name)

Most of the də brə names above refer to towns as well as to mountains (23, 24, 25). It is also important to note that dəbrə now occurs only in proper names. The form tərara has replaced dəbrə as the common noun *mountain*. Both words are glossed "mountain" but tərara serves the function of common noun and dəbrə is an archaic form restricted to proper names.

One characteristic of the names exhibiting the generic-specific order is the frequent use of the construct state marker, which expresses genitive relations. The head noun is indicated by -ə, which is the old accusative case marker. In modern Amharic -ə is no longer productive, and appears only in compounds or archaic expressions.

Indications are that the generic-specific order predominated at the time the construct state was productive. Names which follow the specific-generic order of modern Amharic only rarely use the construct

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4 The use of *Teferi* in place-names is a reflection of Haile Selassie's popularity. Before he became emperor, Haile Selassie was known as *Ras Teferi*, and the name continued to be associated with him throughout his reign. The fate of these *Teferi* names under the new political regime will make an interesting future study.

state.

<div align="center">Zero Generic: Specific-Generic</div>

29. bahɨr dar	sea + edge
30. may šɨgurti	brook + crossings
31. təfəri bər	Teferi + gate
32. təfəri bɨrhan	Teferi + light
33. təfəri kella	Teferi + toll station
34. nəgərit bər	drum + gate
35. abbay dar	Abbay (river name) + edge
36. fərəs bet	horse + house
37. anko bər	anko (Galla tribe) + gate
38. nəfas məwč'a	wind + exit
39. k'ədamawi haylə sɨllase bər	Haile Selassie I + gate
40. dɨngɨl bər	virgin + gate
41. kɨbrə məngɨst	honor + CSM + government
42. agəw mɨdɨr	Agaw (tribe) + land
43. dəmbi dolo	man's name + kind of tree
44. kos amba	kind of tree + plateau
45. ǰala durə	Jala (mountain name) + forest + CSM

The sample also includes a few examples of adjective-noun, verb-noun, and preposition-noun names. Most of these names fit the immediately preceding pattern, i.e., specific-generic, with the true generic unstated.

<div align="center">Adjective-Noun</div>

46. addis abəbə	new + flower
47. addis səlam	new + peace
48. arba mɨnč'	forty + spring, source
49. hullət awlalo	two + plain
50. k'um dɨngay	basic + stone

<div align="center">Verb-Noun</div>

51. səbbərə dɨldɨy	he broke + bridge
52. səlla dɨngay	it became sharp + stone
53. fəlləgə bɨrhan	he sought + light
54. yɨrga aləm	let it be still + world

<div align="center">Preposition-Noun</div>

55. ɨndə sɨllase	like, as + trinity

An examination of these place-names reveals that the names with generic-specific order appear to be older. They use more archaic words and structures. Furthermore, diachronic studies of Amharic have shown that the language had a noun-modifier order at an earlier stage of development.[5] The existence of names with deviant patterns supports this claim. Complaining about the variation in Ethiopian place-names, Robert Cheesman cites an area near Jala Mountain.[6] On one side of the mountain the area is called durə jala (28); on the other side, the same area is jala durə (46). But durə jala is consistent with the older generic-specific construct state pattern; jala durə is simply a reordering of the two nouns to reflect the specific-generic order consistent with the modifier-noun patterns of modern Amharic. It is retention of the -ə construct marker which makes the form deviant and indicates that it is the result of syntactic change. bəgəmɨdɨr (1) also reflects an inconsistency in the use of the construct state. Here the -ə is not affixed to the head noun mɨdɨr, but to bəg, which acts as a modifier in this example.

Only a few grammatical markers occur in Amharic place-names:

(1) -ə, the construct state marker, not productive in modern Amharic;

(2) the verb morphology in 51-55, e.g., tense-aspect;

(3) internal derivations of nouns from verbs, e.g., məwč'a "exit" from wət't'a "go out" (38).

Otherwise the names are remarkably free of bound forms. There are no examples of -očč, the plural marker; there are no examples of -u, the definite article; there are no examples of yə-, the genitive/relative marker. The lack of a plural and a definite article also characterizes the external grammar of proper names.

What is especially interesting is that there are no examples of the modern genitive marker in any of these names. Yet the relationship between the two nouns is often clearly genitive, e.g., agəw mɨdɨr (42). In Amharic the same morpheme yə- introduces relatives;[7] 52, 53, and 54 are best explained as relative verbs with the yə- deleted.

Thus it is possible to use the occurrence of the yə- genitive/relative

5   Talmy Givón, "Historical Syntax and Synchronic Morphology: An Archaeologist's Field Trip," *Papers from the Seventh Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society*, 7 (1971), 394-415. Greta D. Little, "Approaches to Amharic Historical Syntax," Diss., University of North Carolina, 1974.

6   Cheesman, p. 12.

7   For the argument that the genitive morpheme and verbal noun marker are not merely homophonous but the same morpheme, see Hailu Fulass, "Notes on the Verbal Noun and Possession Markers," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 6, No. 2 (1968), 71-76.

marker as a morphological criterion for distinguishing common nouns from proper nouns. The waterfall near t'is ‡sat is called yət'is sat fwafwatə "the falls of t'is ‡sat," for example.

A similar phenomenon exists in English place-names. James B. McMillan has pointed out the omission of definite articles and the lack of plural markers in both internal and external grammar of place-names.[8] Another similarity can be seen in the following pairs:

a. the University of Texas   a'. Texas University
b. the state of Washington   b'. Washington State

a and b being common nouns since they both accept the definite article, whereas a' and b' cannot accept definite articles. Like Amharic, English makes a formal distinction between proper and common nouns on the basis of the use of the genitive marker. In English the word order changes when there is no *of*, but in Amharic there is no such word order shift.

These observations of similar distinctions in languages as diverse as Amharic and English suggest the need for cross-linguistic comparisons of place-name grammars. John Algeo has warned, "It is impossible to say anything about the internal grammar of names that is true of all, for different kinds of names have altogether different internal structures."[9] Nonetheless it may be profitable to compare the same kind of name, e.g., place-names, cross-linguistically in order to discover patterns or sets of patterns.

Typological studies of word order have given us reason to believe that apparently unrelated linguistic structures and processes can be related and used to explain other linguistic phenomena.[10] It may be that the occurrence of genitive markers is dependent on the type of genitive employed by the language. Word order itself may play a key role. There is no question that order in place-names is connected to contemporaneous surface order. When the syntax changes, the place-name formation process changes, as we have seen in jala durə (46) and durə jala (28). Yet the new pattern of name formation does not necessarily follow the new pattern of the language. More cross-linguistic studies of place-naming are needed to determine the universal principles of place-name grammar.

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[8] James B. McMillan, "Observations on American Place-Name Grammar," *American Speech*, 24 (1949), 241-48.

[9] Algeo, p. 20.

[10] Winfred Lehmann, "A Structural Principle of Language and its Implications," *Language*, 49 (1973), 47-67.