

“Obliqueness” as a Component of Argument Structure in Amharic

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to show that some arguments in Amharic count as oblique as opposed to direct. Oblique arguments include the nonagentive subjects of psych verbs but not those of unaccusative verbs, the goal arguments but not the source arguments of ditransitive verbs, and extra “affectee” arguments of unaccusative verbs like ‘get lost’ and ‘die’. These oblique arguments behave differently from direct arguments when it comes to general syntactic processes such as agreement and case marking. I show that the differences cannot be explained in terms of the relative position of the arguments in the clause. Rather, I argue that oblique arguments are arguments that are the complements of a phonologically null adposition. The syntactic properties of oblique arguments can then be derived from the fact that they cannot satisfy the EPP property of Tense, with the consequence that Tense cannot agree with them. The article closes with some discussion of why only certain kinds of arguments can be obliques, why the direct-oblique distinction does not seem to be universal, and what implications the distinction might have for theoretical questions about whether verbs have argument structures.

Keywords: Amharic, argument structure, psych verbs, ditransitives, null prepositions, agreement

1 General framing

In this investigation, I take argument structure to be whatever defines the interface between lexical knowledge and syntactic structure. It is the key to answering one or both

of the following questions: (i) Given a particular verb, what syntactic structures can that verb appear in? (ii) Given a particular syntactic structure, what lexical items can be inserted into it? Question (i) is expressed in the more traditional “projectionist” idiom, in which syntax is induced so as to satisfy lexical properties (e.g., the Projection Principle of Chomsky 1981). Question (ii) is expressed in the more fashionable “constructionist” perspective, where syntactic structure arises autonomously, and lexical items are slotted into it rather freely, the felicity of the results depending on how compatible the core meaning of the item is with that of the construction (e.g., Borer 2005). Either way, not all lexical items are equally compatible with all syntactic structures, and explicating these differences is what I take to be the issue of argument structure in its most general terms.

With this in mind, this chapter explores what needs to be said about argument structure to capture the facts of Amharic, a Semitic language of Ethiopia (Leslau 1995). I argue that argument structure in Amharic has a less-familiar dimension that seems to go beyond simple conceptual necessity. In addition to specifying the number of arguments, types of arguments, and the ordering of those arguments on a thematic hierarchy, Amharic distinguishes between what I call “oblique” arguments and “direct” arguments. Direct and oblique arguments differ syntactically for processes like case assignment, subject agreement, object agreement, and passive. I go on to consider what this notion of obliqueness might amount to in an official syntactic theory. I argue that oblique arguments are those that appear inside a PP headed by a null P, whereas direct arguments are ordinary NPs/DPs. The article closes with some speculations about issues concerning Universal Grammar and crosslinguistic variation that are raised by this investigation.

2 Basics of Amharic argument structure

To build up to the more distinctive aspects of Amharic argument structure, let us begin with the basics, considering the simplest verb types in this language, and what grammatical phenomena reveal them most clearly.

It will come as no surprise that Amharic has a range of monadic (intransitive), dyadic (transitive), and triadic (ditransitive) verbs, as shown in (1).¹

- (1) a. Almaz mot-ətfj. 'die' <1>
Almaz.F die-3fS
'Almaz died.'
- b. Ləmma wiffa-w-in y-ay-al. 'see' <1, 2>
Lemma.M dog-DEF-ACC 3mS-see-AUX.3mS
'Lemma sees the dog.'
- c. Ləmma Almaz-in tarik-u-n nəggər-at. 'tell' <1, 2, 3>
Lemma.M Almaz.F-ACC story-DEF-ACC tell-(3mS)-3fO
'Lemma told Almaz the story.'

It would be very rare, if possible at all, for *motə* 'die' to appear with three NPs, or for *nəggərə* 'tell' to appear with only one NP (putting aside pro-drop). This is a respect in which not all lexical items are equally compatible with all syntactic structures—differences to be indicated for each item, in terms of its basic adicity.

¹ Abbreviations used in glosses include: ACC, accusative; APPL, applicative; AUX, auxiliary; DAT, dative; DEF, definite; F(EM), feminine; FV, final vowel; GER, gerund; IMPF, imperfective; LOC, locative; M(ASC), masculine; NOM, nominative; PASS, passive; PF, perfective; PL, plural; T, tense affix. Agreement markers are glossed with a complex symbol consisting of a number expressing the person of the agreed-with nominal (1, 2, or 3), a lower case letter expressing the gender/number of the agreed-with nominal (m, f, s, or p), and an uppercase letter expressing the type of agreement (S, O, or P(ossessor)). Nominals referring to females are feminine in Amharic, whereas nominals referring to males or inanimate objects like 'book' are almost always masculine. For details of the gender system of Amharic, see Kramer 2009. In glosses of Bantu languages, Arabic numerals refer to noun classes (genders).

Like other languages, Amharic also has verb roots of variable adicity. For example, it has verbs that vary between taking one argument and two arguments, as in anticausative alternations with verbs like ‘break’ and ‘open’. It also has verbs that vary between taking two arguments and three arguments, like ‘send’, with an optional goal argument. Sometimes the stems used with different adicities are identical; sometime they have the same roots but different affixes (e.g., middle/passive/anticausative *tə-* on monadic versions, causative *a-* or *as-* on transitive versions, applicative *-bb* or *-ll* on ditransitive versions; see Amberber 2002). Unfortunately, I do not have the detailed lexical expertise to judge whether optionality and flexibility is the deeper truth about verbs in Amharic or whether rigidity and lexical specification is—a clear bone of contention between projectionists and constructionists.

Another basic issue about argument structure that is relevant to Amharic is which argument is positioned where. For a transitive verb like ‘kiss’, it is not enough to say it appears with two arguments. There is plenty of reason to say that one of the arguments—the agent/causer—always starts out higher in the structure than the other argument—the patient/theme. This can be seen for an example like (2) in several ways.²

- (2) Səw-*īyyəw* Aster-*in* sam-*at/* sam-*ə*.
 man-DEF Aster.F-ACC kiss.PF-(3mS)-3fO/ kiss.PF-3mS
 ‘The man kissed Aster.’

First, subject/agent-object/patient-verb order is normal in this fairly uniform head-final language. (Object-subject-verb order is also possible under some conditions, but this

² Third singular masculine perfective subject agreement, normally realized as /ə/, deletes in front of a vowel-initial suffix, such as the feminine singular object agreement /at/. This is merely a special case of a regular phonological change that helps to resolve vowel hiatus. When a 3mS suffix is present underlyingly but not seen on the surface for this reason, I put parentheses around it in the gloss, as in (2).

clearly involves topicalization of the object, or other discourse-driven movement.)

Second, if the object-theme is a DP, it must be marked with the accusative suffix *-n*;³ the subject-agent cannot be so marked. This is arguably a very direct reflection of the relative heights of the two arguments, since Baker (to appear) argues for (3) as the rule of accusative case assignment in Amharic, following Marantz's (1991) notion of dependent case assignment, as developed by Baker and Vinokurova (2010).

- (3) If there are two distinct argumental nominals X and Y in the same clause such that X c-commands Y, then value the case feature of Y as accusative unless X has already been marked for case.

Third, the subject-agent triggers what we might call "Type 1" agreement on the verb. This sort of agreement is required on all finite verbs, it is absent on verbal nouns, and its form varies significantly with the tense-aspect of the clause: it shows up as a suffix in perfective clauses but as a prefix in imperfective ones (Kramer, 2010:4).

(4)	səbbər-ku	ɨ-səbr
	break.PF-1sS	1sS-break.IMPF
	səbbər-ih	tɨ-səbr
	break.PF-2mS	2mS-break.IMPF
	səbbər-ə	yɨ-səbr
	break.PF-3mS	3mS-break.IMPF

This is plausibly agreement on a high functional head Tense (or Aspect; the exact label is not significant). For example, (5) shows that if the agent refers to a female, the obligatory Type 1 agreement morpheme changes accordingly relative to example (2).

³ Indefinite noun phrases, in contrast, are not marked for accusative case in Amharic. I take these to be NPs, not DPs, and assume that accusative is only spelled out overtly as *-n* on the category D in Amharic (see Baker to appear, and references cited there).

(5) **Almaz** Aster-in sam-əʈʃf-(at). (compare (2))

Almaz.F Aster.F-ACC kiss.PF.3fS-3fO

‘Almaz kissed Aster.’

A fourth grammatical difference that reflects the position of arguments in the clause concerns a second form of agreement, “Type 2” (object) agreement. This sort of agreement is often optional, as shown in (2) and (5). It follows Type 1 agreement in perfective clauses, and does not vary with tense/aspect in form or position. The object-theme of a transitive verb can trigger this sort of agreement, but the subject-agent cannot:

(6) Səw-ıyyəw **Lemma-n** sam-ə-w. (compare (2), (5))

man-DEF Lemma.M-ACC kiss.PF-3mS-3mO

‘The man kissed Lemma.’

A fifth indication of a difference in relative position comes from bound variable anaphora, a classic c-command test. (7a) shows that if the agent-subject is a quantified expression, a pronominal possessor inside the object can be interpreted as a variable bound by it. (7b) shows that the converse is not true: if the object-theme is a quantified expression, a pronominal possessor inside the subject cannot be interpreted as a variable bound by it. (7c) shows that this remains true even if the object-theme precedes the subject, in marked OSV order. Hence, the difference is not attributable simply to precedence in the surface string. (7d) is a minimal comparison with (7c): here the patient is fronted past the agent by passive (A-movement), rather than by scrambling (A-bar movement), and the theme can bind into the agent.

(7) a. Hullu səw lıdʒ-u-n yɪ-wədd-all.

all person child-3mP-ACC 3mS-love.IMPF-AUX.3mS

‘Everybody loves his (own) child.’ (bound reading OK)

b. Abbat-u hullu-n səw yi-wədd-all.

father-3mP all-ACC person 3mS-love.IMPF-AUX.3mS

‘His father loves everyone.’ (one person’s father, bound reading impossible)

c. Hullu-n səw abbat-u yi-wədd-all.

all-ACC person father-3mP 3mS-love.IMPF-AUX.3mS

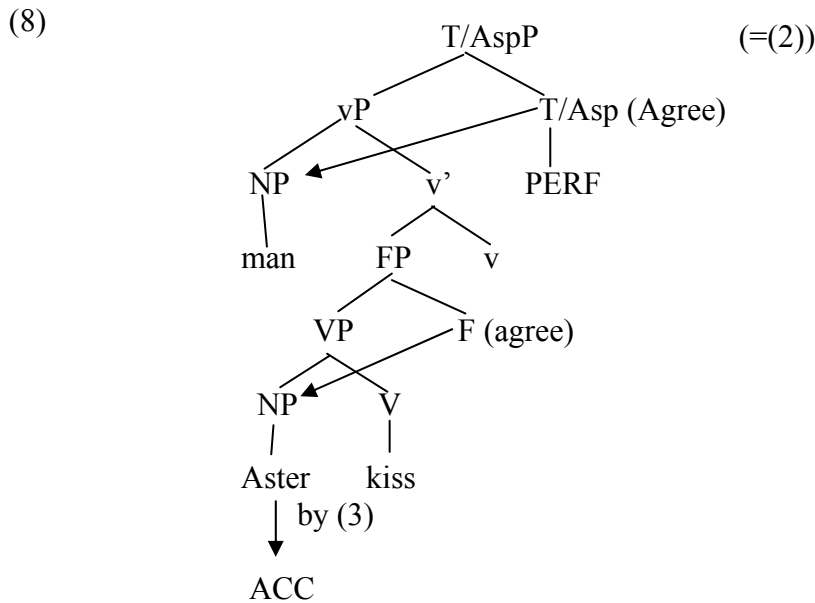
‘His father loves everyone.’ (one person’s father, bound reading impossible)

d. Hullu səw b-abbat-u tə-wədd-o nəbbər.

all person by-father-3mP PASS-love-GER.3mS AUX

‘Everyone was loved by his (own) father.’ (bound reading OK)

These five differences between the agent-subject and the theme-object are explained in familiar ways if we say that the agent asymmetrically c-commands the theme in the core syntactic structure of Amharic, as shown in (8).



Given that specifiers are initial in Amharic (and perhaps in all languages), the agent being higher than the object translates into the agent preceding the object in normal word order. The agent being higher also means that, if it is present, a high functional head like T/Asp will encounter it before the theme when it probes downward for something to agree with (Chomsky, 2000). Type 2 agreement is hosted by a lower functional head, called F in (8). This agrees with the object, not the subject, because the object is lower than F, whereas the subject is higher.⁴ The subject A-binds the object and everything in it, satisfying the condition on bound variable anaphora. Finally, the agent c-commanding the theme means that accusative case is assigned to the theme but not the agent by the rule of dependent case assignment in (3).

This discussion establishes that the familiar—arguably universal—association between thematic roles and syntactic structure holds in Amharic. It also gives us a baseline for the grammatical processes that can be used to reveal other structural differences, hence other argument structure differences, in this language.

⁴ See Baker to appear for why I do not necessarily identify F with transitive *v* in Amharic. In that work, I also explain why I take Type 2 morphemes to be the result of Agree between a functional head and a DP, not cliticized pronouns of (more or less) the sort found in Romance, as Kramer (2010) argues. My reasons in brief are these: (i) The Agree theory can explain why only one Type 2 morpheme can appear on a verb even in ditransitive constructions in Amharic, whereas more than one pronominal clitics can appear on the verb in Romance. (ii) The Agree theory can explain why a Type 2 morpheme is possible only with the goal and not with the theme in ditransitive constructions (see (9) vs. (12), (15)), whereas an accusative pronoun can cliticize to the verb without a dative one doing so in Romance. (iii) Although type 2 affixes seem optional with theme objects and are related to the definiteness of those objects, these affixes are obligatory with psych subjects and applied objects of certain kinds, regardless of their definiteness (see, e.g., (22)). In these environments, Type 2 morphemes are seen to be obligatory and semantically inert, as one expects agreement to be. I then suggest that type 2 agreement is obligatory even with themes if and only if they have undergone object shift out of VP, to get close enough to F for Agree to apply.

That being said, there may be attractions to a combined approach that says that both Agree and cliticization are involved in the grammar of Type 2 morphemes in Amharic. Kramer (in preparation) does this by saying that Type 2 morphemes are cliticized D heads, but a D can only cliticize to *v* in Amharic if *v* Agrees with DP. Conversely, I have contemplated a view in which F agrees with DP in Amharic, but then F combines with the verb by cliticizing to it (at PF) rather than by (say) head movement. As far as I can tell, the differences between these various technical possibilities have little impact on the points I make below.

3 Hierarchy in triadic verbs

Crucially for this inquiry, these same phenomena can be used to establish the relative hierarchy among the three arguments of triadic verbs like ‘tell’ in (9) and ‘rob’ in (10).

(9) Ləm̩ma Almaz-ɪn tarik-u-n nəggər-at. (= (1c))

Lemma.M Almaz.F-ACC story-DEF-ACC tell-(3mS)-3fO

‘Lemma told Almaz the story.’

(10) Ləm̩ma Aster-ɪn gənzəb-u-n sərrək'-at.

Lemma.M Aster.F-ACC money-DEF-ACC rob-(3mS)-3fO

‘Lemma robbed Aster of the money.’

First, the very same considerations show that the agent is the highest argument of the three, generated above both the theme and the goal ((9)) or source ((10)). This argument is the first in canonical word order; it cannot be accusative, whereas the other arguments must be;⁵ it must trigger Type 1 aspect-sensitive agreement; it cannot trigger Type 2 invariant agreement. (Presumably a quantified agent can also bind a pronoun inside either the goal or the theme, but I have not investigated this closely.)

Some of these tests also show that the goal/source/affectee argument c-commands the theme argument, but not vice versa. Case assignment and aspect-sensitive agreement are not able to make any distinctions here. But there is a difference in word order: affectee-theme order is normal, and theme-affectee order is marked at best, especially when both are accusative:⁶

(11) a. Ləm̩ma Aster-ɪn məs'haf-u-n asayy-at.

Lemma.M Aster.F-ACC book-DEF-ACC show.PF-(3mS)-3fO

⁵ The goal in (9) can also be dative rather than accusative; see (27) below.

⁶ When the goal is in dative case, then theme-goal-verb order is tolerated more easily, perhaps because the dative argument can then be analyzed as a PP rather than an NP; see also note 7 and Baker to appear.

‘Lemma showed Aster the book.’

b. ??Ləm̩ma məs’haf-u-n Aster-in asayy-at.

Lemma.M book-DEF-ACC Aster.F-ACC show.PF-(3mS)-3fO

‘Lemma showed Aster the book.’

Furthermore, the goal/source/affectee can trigger Type 2 (object) agreement, as shown in (9) and (10). It is impossible for the theme to trigger this sort of agreement when an affectee is present, as shown in (12) and (13)—although it is normal for the theme to trigger this agreement when there is no third argument (see (6), also Baker to appear).⁷

(12) *Ləm̩ma Almaz-in tarik-u-n nəggər-ə-w.

Lemma.M Aster.F-ACC story.M-DEF-ACC tell-3mS-3mO

‘Lemma told Almaz the story.’

(13) *Ləm̩ma Aster-in gənzəb-u-n sərrək’-ə-w.

Lemma.M Aster.F-ACC money.M-DEF-ACC rob-3mS-3mO

‘Lemma robbed Aster of the money.’

My limited data on bound variable anaphora is consistent with this. In (14) the quantified NP is only understood as the goal, not the theme (as expected, given (11)). And, to the extent that the example is felicitous, it is possible to interpret the pronoun inside the second object as a variable bound by the first object.

(14) (?)Aster hullu-n səw abbat-u-n assayy-ətʃʃ.

Aster.F all-ACC person father-3mP-ACC show-3fS

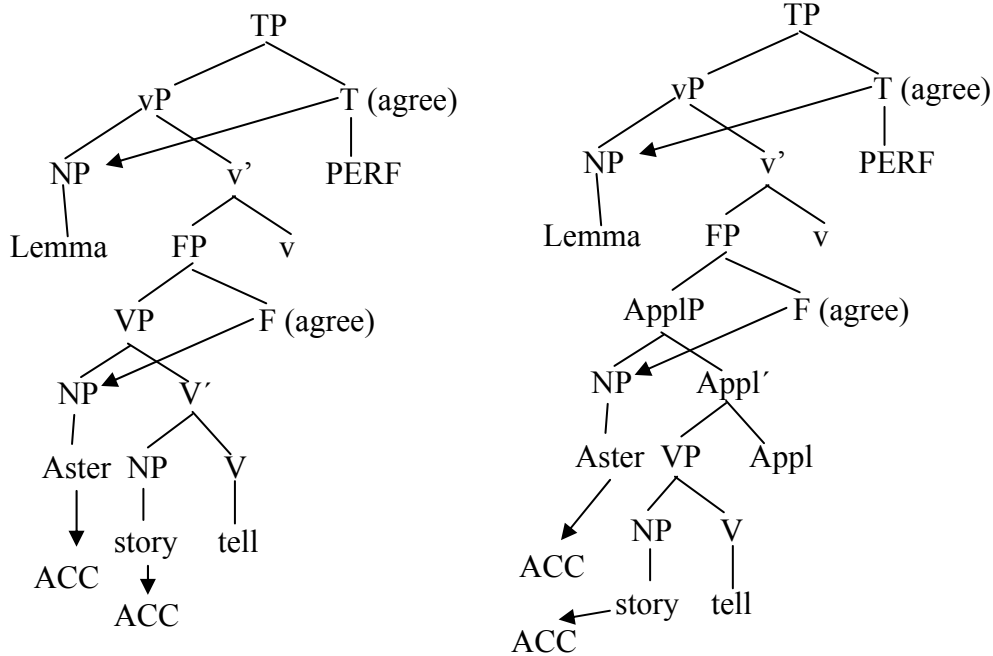
‘Aster showed everyone his own father.’

⁷ Sometimes the goal or source argument is projected as an explicit PP with overt P head. When this occurs, object agreement with the theme is possible, the PP not intervening (Baker to appear). Some goals in dative case may marginally be analyzed as PPs in this sense, but goals in accusative case never are.

When interpreted in the light of (7), this supports saying that the goal A-binds the theme in a structure with no scrambling.

These three considerations then converge on a structure in which the goal or source asymmetrically c-commands the theme, much as the agent asymmetrically c-commands both the goal/source and the theme. This is shown in the structures in (15).

(15) Structure: or: (=9a))



These structures directly capture the word order in (11) and the bound variable anaphora possibility in (14). F agrees with the goal or source rather than the theme when both are present, because that is the first NP it finds probing downward, just as T/Asp agrees with the agent rather than the theme when both are present (see (8)). I leave open whether the goal/source/affectee is in Spec of VP (Larson, 1988), or whether it is generated as the Spec of a higher functional head Appl (Pylkkänen, 2008); either assumption gets the crucial fact that it is lower than the agent but higher than the theme. That this is equally

true for both the goal argument of ‘show’, ‘give’, or ‘tell’ and the source argument of ‘rob’ is important for this inquiry, putting in context the difference to be discussed next.

4 Another factor in Amharic argument structure: “Obliqueness”

So far Amharic looks quite ordinary in these respects. At most, Amharic verbs list the number and semantic type of their arguments; the position of those arguments is then determined by their semantic type according to universal principles (the Thematic Hierarchy, the UTAH).⁸ Now we are ready to recognize the extra factor in Amharic argument structure that distinguishes verbs in a seemingly language-specific way.

4.1 Two kinds of triadic verbs

First, a significant difference shows up between triadic verbs with a source argument like ‘rob’ and triadic verbs with a goal argument like ‘tell’ when the verbs are passivized. No difference was evident in the active versions, seen in (9) and (10). But the passive versions are quite different. In the passive of ‘tell’ or ‘give’ the theme argument must be nominative and may trigger subject agreement on the verb. The goal argument may optionally be marked accusative, and it must trigger object agreement on the verb:

(16) a. **Almaz-(in)** tarik-u-(*n) tə-nəgr-ow-**at** nəbbər.

Almaz.F-ACC story-DEF-(*ACC) PASS-tell-3mS.GER-3fO AUX

‘Almaz was told the story.’

b. **Almaz-(?in)** məs’haf-(u)-(*n) tə-sət’t’-**at**.

Almaz.F-ACC book-DEF-(*ACC) PASS-give-(3mS)-3fO

‘Almaz was given a (the) book.’

⁸ Pending here is the question of whether themes and agents are in different positions even with one argument verbs—the status of the Unaccusative Hypothesis in Amharic. This is taken up briefly below.

In contrast, in the passive of ‘rob’, the theme argument must be accusative and cannot trigger any kind of agreement on the verb. The source argument can only be nominative, and must trigger subject agreement on the verb:

- (17) **Aster** fant’a-wa-n tə-sərrək’-əṭṭfj-(*əw). (*Aster-in)
 Aster.F suitcase-3fP-ACC PASS-rob-3fS-(*3mO) Aster-ACC
 ‘Aster was robbed of her suitcase.’

Example (18) shows that it is bad to have the goal trigger subject agreement and the theme have accusative case in the passive of ‘give’.

- (18) ?*Almaz məs’haf-u-n tə-sət’t’-əṭṭfj.
 Almaz.F book-DEF-ACC PASS-give-3fS
 ‘Almaz was given the book.’

Conversely, (19) shows that it is bad to have the theme trigger subject agreement and the source bear accusative case in the passive of ‘rob’.

- (19) *Gənzəb-u Aster-in tə-sərrək’-ə. (OK with *kə’aster*)
 money-DEF Aster-ACC PASS-rob-3mS from-Aster
 ‘The money was stolen from Aster.’

Like *sərrək’ə* ‘rob’ in this respect are the verbs ‘to lose x on y’, ‘to strip x of y’ (e.g. an officer of his rank), ‘to hit x on y’, and another verb *zərrəfə*, also translated as ‘rob’ or ‘steal’ (Leslau 1995: 147, sec. 41.17); all of these verbs arguably have source arguments. Like ‘give’ and ‘tell’ are applicative verbs in Amharic, formed from transitive verb stems by adding the suffixes *-ll* (goal/benefactive) or *-bb* (malefactive).

Given the results of the previous section, we cannot attribute this to a difference in the position of the source and goal arguments relative to the theme. Nevertheless, sources act like the subjects of passives, and goals cannot. We thus need some other

distinction. At a minimum, we would need a new label: we could say that instead of both having the argument structure <Agent, Affectee, Theme>, ‘rob’ has the argument structure <Agent, Source, Theme> and ‘give’ has <Agent, Goal, Theme>. But we would still need to make principles of case and agreement sensitive to this label, ideally for principled reasons. Alternatively—closer to my official proposal—we could say that some arguments are marked as being oblique: ‘give’ has the argument structure <Agent, Goal/Affectee*, Theme> and ‘rob’ has <Agent, Source/Affectee, Theme>, where a starred role is oblique and somehow resists being associated with subject agreement.

4.2 Dyadic verbs with oblique arguments

This oblique-direct distinction can be found with other kinds of verbs as well. Amharic has a second kind of dyadic verb, contrasting with simple <Agent, Theme> verbs like *samə* ‘kiss’, discussed above. Some verbs that one would expect to be unaccusative verbs (<Theme>) have dyadic as well as monadic versions; these include ‘die’, ‘get lost’, and ‘exist’ (Amberber, 2002:60; 2005).⁹

- (20) a. Almaz(-in) zəməd mot-at. (*mot-ətʃtʃ)
- Almaz.F-(ACC) relative die-(3mS)-3fO die-3fS
- ‘Almaz had a relative die on her.’
- b. Ləmma sejt lidz-u t’əffa-tʃtʃ-əw (or (?)Lemma-n)
- Lemma.M female child-DEF lose-3fS-3mO Lemma-ACC
- ‘Lemma lost his daughter.’

⁹ One might wonder if the predicates in (20) are really monadic ones, with what I say is the affectee argument of the verb really being the possessor of the theme argument (I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this possibility). If so, then the best glosses for the examples in (20) would be ‘Almaz’s relative died’, ‘Lemma’s daughter got lost’, and ‘My three children exist’. We know, however, that this is not the case, because DP-internal possessors in Amharic are marked with the “genitive” particle *yə* (e.g., *yə-Ləmma bet* ‘Lemma’s house’), and that particle is absent in (20a,b).

- c. Sost lidz-otʃʃ all-u-ʃʃ.
 three child-PL exist-3pS-1sO

‘I have three children.’

Terminologically, let us say that these have the argument structure <Affectee, Theme>.

They differ from simple <Agent, Theme> verbs in several respects. The affectee argument is not like the agent argument of a normal transitive verb in that it triggers object agreement, not subject agreement, and in that it (optionally) bears accusative case. At the same time, it is not like the theme argument of a normal transitive verb in that object agreement with it is obligatory (not optional), and accusative case is optional (not obligatory). Furthermore, the affectee argument seems to be generated higher than the theme, because it comes before the theme in the most common word order, and because when quantified it can bind a pronoun inside the theme, as shown in (21) (contrast (7c)).

- (21) Hullu səw lidz-u t'əff-a-w.
 all person child-3mP lose-3mS-3mO

‘Everybody lost his own child.’

The affectee thus asymmetrically c-commands the theme for these dyadic verbs by the same three tests that show that the source or goal argument of a ditransitive verb c-commands the theme: word order, object agreement, and bound variable anaphora. But the affectee is different from an agent in that it cannot trigger subject agreement, and can bear accusative case. These are the same properties that the affectee arguments of ‘give’ and ‘tell’ have in passives, as shown above. I conclude that the affectee arguments of these dyadic verbs are also oblique: the verbs are <Affectee*, Theme>, not just <Affectee, Theme>. Note that it is not particularly surprising that unaccusative verbs

with an extra argument behave like passives with an extra argument. This is a special case of the general fact that unaccusative verbs behave like passive verbs in many respects in many languages. Also having the same syntactic behavior are applicatives derived from unaccusative roots by suffixing *-ll* or *-bb* (e.g. ‘to be born for’).

4.3 Impersonal monadic verbs

The obliqueness distinction is relevant even to seemingly monadic verbs in Amharic. Some monadic verbs stand out as having object agreement, not subject agreement, with their sole argument. The following are some examples:

- (22) a. **Aster** tʃənnək’-at. (Amberber 2002:20; also OK: *Aster-ḥn*)
 Aster.F worry-(3mS)-3fO
 ‘Aster is worried.’
- b. Rab-ə-ገገ. (Leslau 1995: 435)
 hunger.PF-3mS-1sO
 ‘I am hungry.’
- c. Almaz amməm-at (Also OK: *Almaz-ḥn*)
 Almaz.F hurt-(3mS)-3fO
 ‘Almaz is sick, Almaz hurts.’

Notice also that the single argument of these verbs can optionally be marked as accusative.¹⁰ These verbs are different from both canonical unaccusative verbs like ‘die’ ((1a)) and ‘get lost’ ((23a)) and unergative verbs like ‘sing’ ((23b)), whose sole arguments cannot be accusative and trigger subject agreement, not object agreement:

¹⁰ Just what conditions this option (if anything) is not clear. Amberber (2002, 2005) says that the argument can be nominative or accusative in most cases, without further remark. The accusative option is attested but not very common in Leslau 1995, and it is accepted but rarely offered and sometimes actively dispreferred by my consultant. See below for some theoretical discussion.

- (23) a. Lemma t'əff-a. (*t'əff-a-w)
 Lemma.M get.lost-3mS get.lost-3mS-3mO
 'Lemma got lost.'
- b. Aster zəffən-ətʃʃ.
 Aster.F sing-3fS
 'Aster sang.'

We may thus say that the sole arguments in (22) are neither agents nor themes, but experiencers (affectees). Furthermore, their grammatical properties are similar to those of the affectees of triadic 'give' or dyadic 'lose': they resist subject agreement, require object agreement, and tolerate accusative case. The arguments of these verbs are thus oblique in the sense I have been describing; their argument structure is <Affectee*>, not just <Affectee>. Leslau (1995) calls them impersonal verbs, because subject agreement is default third person masculine agreement (sometimes deleted phonologically; see note 2), just like ordinary impersonal verbs such as *yɨ-mok'k'-all* 'it is hot'.

Summarizing, we have seen that some arguments in Amharic can be designated as oblique. Oblique arguments include the middle arguments of some ditransitive verbs ('give', 'tell') but not others ('rob'), the higher argument of dyadic unaccusative verbs, and the sole argument of some monadic verbs (psych verbs). It is a general feature of argument structure in Amharic, present on verbs of all adicities, and not reducible to position relative to other arguments.¹¹ This is a potential barrier to reductionistic approaches to argument structure, and it calls for a deeper theoretical analysis.

¹¹ Given this classification, we might predict that another type of dyadic verb could be possible in Amharic, one in which the *lower* of the two arguments is oblique. Such verbs would have the argument structure <Agent, Affectee*>, in contrast to both <Agent, Theme> and <Affectee*, Theme>. Given the tests we have in hand, such a verb would only be detected in transitivity alternations. The transitive version

5 “Oblique” arguments as NPs governed by a null P

So what is obliqueness really, from a theoretical perspective? It may help to expand the list of possible theta-roles to include more fine-grained options: experiencers and sources as opposed to agents, themes, and goals. But that is not sufficient by itself; one still needs to say how and why the morphosyntax is sensitive to these labels. A striking fact about oblique arguments in Amharic is that they are expressed using the same case, agreement, and word order resources as other arguments are. In some languages, it might be enough to say that experiencer-goal arguments take a special case, say dative, which distinguishes them from other arguments. But that is not true in Amharic. Here oblique arguments are signaled by normal object agreement and normal case marking being used in different combinations—for example, an argument with nominative case that triggers object agreement. Hence, we should hope to extend the normal rules of agreement and case assignment in Amharic to these new arguments in some fairly principled way.

5.1 *Motivating the core proposal*

My proposal is that an oblique argument is one that is expressed in the syntax as a PP headed by a null P, rather than as an NP. For monadic verbs, this would give the difference between an experiencer verb and an unaccusative verb shown in (24).¹²

(24) a. [TP [VP [PP \emptyset_P Almaz] be.sick] T] (=22c)

would look like an ordinary agent-theme verb, but the intransitive version would look like an impersonal verb, not like an unaccusative verb. A possible case is ‘hurt’, for which the transitive version in (i) is attested, along with the impersonal version (showing object agreement with the sole argument) in (22c).

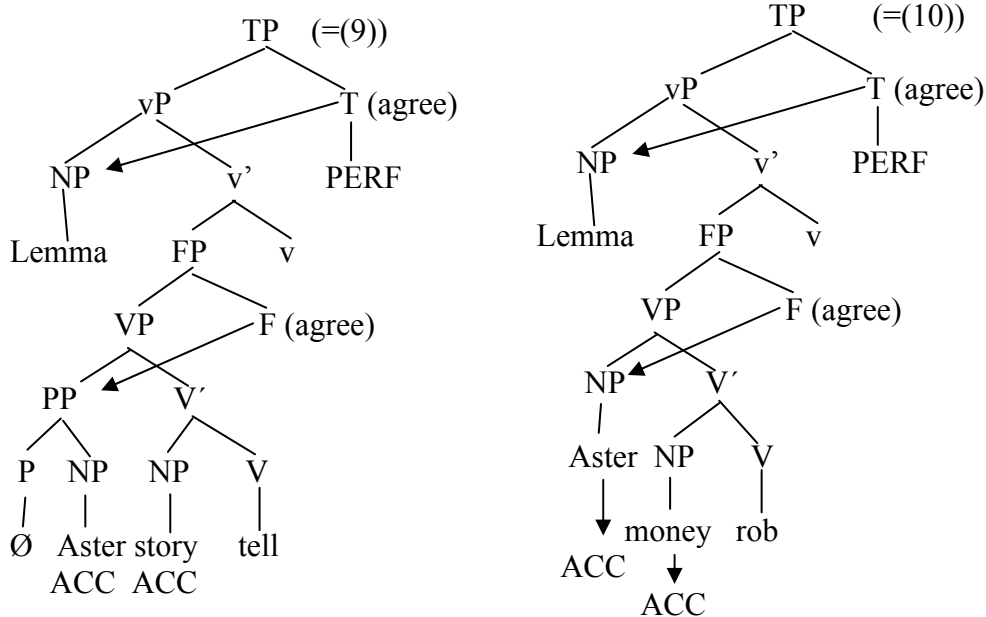
- (i) Siga y-ammə-ɲɲ-all. (Leslau 1995: 437)
meat 3mS-sicken-1sO-AUX.3mS
‘The meat makes me sick.’

¹² I show the null P as a preposition in my diagrams, for convenience and familiarity, but it is possible that it should really be a postposition, depending on one’s analysis of Amharic’s head-finality.

b. [TP [VP [NP Almaz] die] T] (=1a)

For triadic verbs, it would give the representational difference in (25).¹³

(25)



Examples with dyadic unaccusative verbs like ‘lose’ and ‘die’ ((20a,b)) would also have a structure like (25a), except that there would be no agent in Spec, vP. I tentatively assume that this null P means something, helping to justify its existence in the structure in minimalist terms. However, its meaning is rather general and abstract—something like ‘goal’ or ‘affectee’—and largely or completely redundant with the meaning of the verb. This may help account for it being phonologically null, along the lines of Emonds’s (1997) “Invisible Category Principle”. See section 6 for more discussion.

This proposal seems crosslinguistically plausible in that oblique arguments in Amharic are reminiscent of quirky dative case arguments in (e.g.) Icelandic in several

¹³ I continue to leave open whether the PP or NP is in SpecVP or in SpecAppIP, which is an independent distinction. (But see section 6.2 for a conjecture about null headed PPs being licensed only in SpecAppIP.)

ways. Both are the subjects of psych verbs and goals of triadic verbs or dyadic nonactive verbs, for example:

(26) a. Mér kólnar. (Icelandic)

Me.DAT get.cold.3sS

‘I’m getting cold.’

b. Ég sýndi henni bílana.

I.NOM showed her.DAT the.cars.ACC

‘I showed her the cars.’

c. Henni voru sýndir bílarnir.

her.DAT were shown the.cars.NOM

‘She was shown the cars.’

Probably this is not a coincidence. Note also that quirky dative NPs resist subject agreement in Icelandic ((26a,c)). That is a key feature of oblique arguments in Amharic too – arguably the one that drives their other peculiarities.

Even within Amharic, one can see a partial relationship between obliqueness and dative case. The middle argument of ‘give’ and ‘tell’ can be marked with dative case (*la*), but the middle argument of ‘rob’ cannot be:

(27) Ləmma l-Almaz tarik-u-n nəggər-at.

Lemma.M DAT-Almaz.F story-DEF-ACC tell-(3mS)-3fO

‘Lemma told Almaz the story.’

(28) *Ləmma l-Almaz gənzəb-wa-n sərrək’-at.

Lemma.M DAT-Almaz.F money-3fP-ACC rob-(3mS)-3fO

‘Lemma robbed Aster of her money.’

The option of dative case correlates with the fact that the middle argument of ‘give’ acts like it is oblique (even when it is not dative), but the middle argument of ‘rob’ does not.

However, we cannot simply say that obliqueness is phonologically null dative case in Amharic, for several reasons. First, Amharic has overt dative case as well, as seen in (27).¹⁴ Second, some oblique arguments can never appear with overt dative, including the experiencer subjects of ‘hunger’, ‘be sick’, etc. Third, oblique arguments in Amharic are *not* resistant to object agreement, even though they resist subject agreement. That seems different from Icelandic, where dative arguments resist agreement with all primary predicates (although Icelandic has no object agreement to compare with directly).

We want then some kind of connection between obliqueness in Amharic and quirky dative in Icelandic, but it needs to be somewhat indirect. This leads to my proposal that oblique arguments are PPs with null heads. This null P could assign dative case in Icelandic (McFadden, 2004), but have different effects in syntax of Amharic.

5.2 Developing the core proposal

To develop the syntactic consequences of this, let us zero in on a key theoretical question: *Why would a nominal be eligible for Agree with F but not with T?* The plausible reasons are few, assuming that both fall under the same theory of Agree (see note 4 above and Baker to appear for defense of this assumption).

I suggest that the crucial independent difference between T and F is that T is associated with an EPP feature, whereas F is not. We can see this rather clearly in English, for example. The NP that T agrees with is also drawn up to the SpecTP position,

¹⁴ We know that *la* is a case marker in (27), not a P, because it does not block object agreement with the goal. Moreover, the goal in this construction still blocks object agreement with theme; see Baker to appear.

but the NP that F agrees with (the object, abstractly) is not drawn up into SpecFP. So an underlying structure like (29a) comes out as (29b), but not as (29c) (Chomsky, 1993).

- (29) a. [TP will [vP Mary v [FP **F** [vP see **John**]]] →
 b. [TP Mary will [vP -- v [FP **F** [vP see **John**]]] *not*
 c. *[TP Mary will [vP -- v [FP **John F** [vP – see]]]

Let us assume that the same asymmetry holds in Amharic, although it is less obvious from word order, because Amharic is a Spec-Complement-Head language, so movement to a higher Spec position is likely to be string-vacuous.¹⁵

We can connect this rather familiar difference between T and F to the PP/NP distinction in Amharic with the following auxiliary assumptions:

- (30) a. A null-headed PP cannot satisfy the EPP feature of a head.
 b. XP cannot satisfy the EPP feature of T if T agrees with YP distinct from XP.
 c. The NP/DP complement of \emptyset_P cannot (A-)move out of the PP.

Assumption (30a) is a special case of something that Landau (2007) claims to hold with considerable generality: that no XP with null head X can satisfy the EPP feature of another head Y.¹⁶ The case at hand is simply this with XP=PP and Y=T/Asp. Therefore,

¹⁵ Note that this distinction between T and F need not be universal. Perhaps there are VSO languages that lack an EPP feature on T (cf. McCloskey 1996), and S-Infl-O-V-PP/CP languages like Bambarra that have an EPP feature on F (cf. Koopman 1992). Such languages might exist, and the implications for oblique arguments in those languages would need to be investigated. But both kinds of language are relatively rare compared to garden variety S-Infl-V-O-PP/CP languages.

Why T should have an EPP feature more often than F is an interesting conceptual question that I won't speculate on here, beyond conjecturing that it has to do with T being the highest functional head in the clause (cf. Baker and Willie 2010).

¹⁶ Landau derives this from his PF-oriented version of the EPP, which makes sense in that the nullness of P is presumably a PF property. But I assume that the details of how the EPP is stated are not crucial here.

An alternative (noticed also by an anonymous reviewer) would be to replace (30a) with a statement that PPs in general cannot satisfy the EPP property of T in Amharic, whether null headed or not—perhaps because T seeks a D feature (Chomsky 1995). That version would presumably be parametrized, not universal, given the existence of locative inversion in English and other languages (e.g., (31)). Whether there is locative inversion in Amharic is unclear to me: word orders like 'In-market many people be' are attested (Leslau 1995:528), but it is not easy to tell if the locative is in SpecTP or not.

an oblique argument cannot move to Spec, TP in Amharic. Next I assume (30b), that the agreement property of T and its EPP property are linked such that it is impossible for one phrase to be agreed with and a different one satisfy T's EPP feature. (30b) is a parameterized property, not a universal one; it does not hold in English and Icelandic, for example. (For Icelandic, this is seen in (26c), where the dative argument satisfies the EPP feature of T, but T agrees with the theme still inside VP.) But (30b) has been said to hold in Bantu languages by Baker (2003) and Carstens (2005), to explain (among other things) why the Bantu verb must agree with the fronted locative in cases of locative inversion ((31)), not with the postverbal theme, as is possible in English.

(31) Oko-mesa kw-a-hir-aw-a ehilanga. (Kinande)

LOC.17-table 17S-T-put-PASS-FV peanuts.19

'On the table were put peanuts.' (**hy-a-hir-aw-a* '19S-T-put-PASS-FV')

Taken together, (30a) and (30b) imply that T cannot agree with an oblique argument in Amharic, or it will be doomed to violate its EPP property. In contrast, F does not have an EPP property to worry about. Therefore it is freer to agree with an oblique argument, this being allowed by the laws of agreement per se.¹⁷ This is at the heart of my account of the differences between oblique arguments and direct ones.

¹⁷ To permit object agreement with oblique arguments, it is also necessary to say that this kind of null P does not count as a phase head. It also appears not to assign its own case, given that (3) can apply to mark the oblique argument as accusative, as long as other conditions are met. In this way, my proposal is different from Rezac's (2008) otherwise rather similar use of null Ps. Rezac assumes that null headed PPs are always phases, and this should block subject agreement and object agreement equally.

Baker and Kramer (to appear) argue for a different kind of null P in Amharic: one more like Rezac's, which does assign oblique case to its complement. This results in what have traditionally been called prepositional phrases in an otherwise head-final language. Those null Ps differ from the one posited here in a cluster of ways: they have meanings not largely redundant with that of the verb ('from', 'toward', 'with', etc.), they block F (as well as T) from agreeing with their object, they block the assignment of accusative case to their complements by (3), and they assign oblique case to their complements. More thorough comparison of these two quite different kinds of null P should be theoretically revealing.

Finally, (30c) closes a loophole in the account. Without it, T could agree with the NP inside the null PP, and the NP itself could satisfy the EPP without carrying the PP along with it. (30c) is presumably related to the fact that overt Ps cannot be stranded by NP movement in pseudopassives in most languages (English being an exception). It may, however, be a point of variation; see section 6.3 below for some discussion.

5.3 Applying the core proposal: impersonal verbs

With these assumptions in place, we can consider some derivations, to see how the syntax of direct versus oblique arguments follows from this. First, as a baseline, consider a simple unaccusative clause. The sole argument is a direct one, NP or DP not PP. Hence T can agree with it, and must to satisfy its EPP property (assuming that inserting an expletive *pro* would be a last resort). The theme argument then moves to Spec, TP. Since there is no higher argument—indeed no other argument at all—the accusative case rule in (3) does not apply, and the argument shows up as nominative:



One possible complication is whether agreeing F is also present in this structure. The standard assumption is that it is not, because F is no other than agentive *v*. But Amharic is different from many other languages in that object agreement is possible on nonagentive verbs whenever that verb has a goal/affectee argument as well as a theme, as we have seen in examples like (16) and (20). This led Baker (to appear) to claim that F is distinct from transitive *v* in Amharic. If so, then it could be present in (32) as well. Let us assume then that it is, and it does agree with the argument *Aster* in syntax. However, this does not prevent T from also agreeing with *Aster* (given that my (2008) Case Dependent of Agreement parameter set “no” in Amharic; see Baker to appear), and it must to satisfy

its EPP feature. I then assume that the presence of T agreement with an NP suppresses the morphological expression of F agreement with that same NP, by “Kinyalolo’s Constraint” (Carstens, 2005:253; Kinyalolo, 1991), which I take to hold at PF:

- (33) Kinyalolo’s Constraint: in an adjoined structure [i.e. within a single morphological word –MCB], AGR on a lower head is inert if and only if its features are predictable from AGR on a higher head.

This constraint seems to be parameterized, holding for example in the Bantu languages but not in Burushaski on the analysis of Baker (2008: 215), where the sole argument of an unaccusative verb does visibly trigger both object agreement and subject agreement on the verb (original data from Willson 1996). The analysis in (32) says that the syntax of Amharic is just like that of Burushaski in this respect, except that the object agreement on F is “inert” (suppressed at PF) by (33) in Amharic.¹⁸

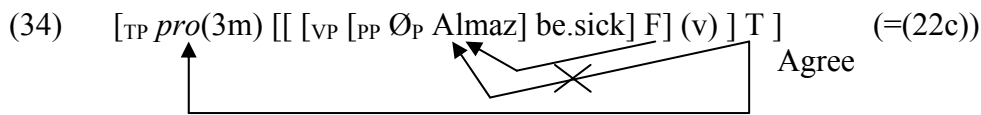
Compare this derivation with that of a monadic experiencer verb like (22c), whose argument is oblique. This will have the representation in (34), different from (32) in that the argument is contained in a null-headed PP. F is definitely present, and agrees with the NP in PP, this being the closest goal. T/Asp is present as well, but it cannot agree with *Almaz*, or its EPP feature will be violated: PP cannot satisfy it by (30a), NP cannot by (30c), and nothing else can if T agrees with NP by (30b) (concerns that do not

¹⁸ Ruth Kramer (personal communication) points out a possible problem for Kinyalolo’s Constraint in Amharic: there do seem to be two agreements with the subject on the same verb in a so-called compound imperfective form, one a prefix and the other a suffix (compare (4)). An example is (i).

- (i) **tɨ-səbr-all-əŋf** (Leslau 1995:342)
 3fS(IMPF)-break.IMPF-AUX-3fS(PF)
 ‘She breaks it, she will break it.’

However, I assume that there are really two distinct morphological words here, one built around the main verb *səbr* ‘break’ and the other around the auxiliary *allə* ‘be, exist, have’ (also usable as a main verb, as in (20c)). That the two are written together as one word in Amharic I take to be merely an orthographic convention. In Bantu too subject agreement shows up on both the tense-bearing auxiliary and the main verb if (and only if) they are separate words, as Kinyalolo (1991) discusses at length.

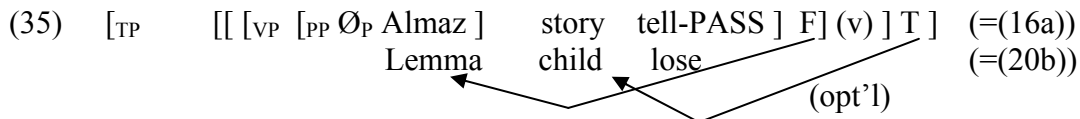
apply to F). Therefore T does not agree with *Almaz*, and the agreement of F with NP is not suppressed by (33). We may assume that an expletive *pro* is inserted in Spec, TP as a last resort to satisfy T's EPP property, T showing masculine singular (default) agreement with this expletive. Finally, the NP *Almaz* is not c-commanded by any other argument (but at most by an expletive), so (3) does not mark it as accusative. We thus derive that this argument has nominative case but triggers object agreement, a combination of properties not found with direct arguments (themes) of transitive or unaccusative verbs.



On the less common alternative in which *Almaz* is marked accusative, see below.

5.4 Special issues with dyadic constructions

Somewhat more complex are structures that contain both an oblique goal/experiencer argument and a distinct theme argument—those with either a ‘lose’-type verb in its dyadic incarnation, or a ‘give’-type verb in the passive. Both have a structure like (35).¹⁹



First, F agrees with the affectee (*Almaz*, *Lemma*): that is the closest argument, just as it is in the active version of ‘tell’, and F is not troubled by the PP shell, since it has no EPP feature to be concerned with. Next T/Asp comes into consideration. It definitely cannot agree with the affectee, because it does have an EPP property, just as in (34). The new question is what happens next. There seem to be two likely possibilities: either T agrees

¹⁹ Here I put aside possible questions of how the agent of a passive is represented syntactically. If there is a null category expressing the agent in the syntax in Amharic, then it is invisible for case and agreement.

with the theme ‘money’/’story’ and that moves to SpecTP to satisfy the EPP, or an expletive is inserted in SpecTP and T agrees with it, just as in (34).

Indeed, both possibilities seem to be attested. (36) gives a version in which T shows explicit agreement with the theme:

(36) Ləmma-n sejt lɪdʒ-u t’əffa-tʃtʃ-əw.

Lemma.M-ACC female child-3mP lose-3fS-3mO

‘Lemma lost his daughter.’

Notice that the affected argument *Lemma* is also marked accusative here (and not genitive; cf. note 9). We can attribute that to ‘daughter’ c-commanding it after it moves to Spec, TP to satisfy T’s EPP feature.²⁰ The fact that *Lemma* is sentence initial in this example is then the result of topicalization, as assumed also by Amberber 2005:311-312.²¹ In contrast, (37) gives examples in which T shows default third person masculine agreement, rather than agreement with the feminine or plural theme argument.

(37) a. Ləmma sejt lɪdʒ-u t’əff-a-w.

Lemma.M female child-DEF lose-3mS-3mO

²⁰ Baker and Vinokurova (2010) assumed that (the Sakha version of) (3) applies immediately, whenever the configuration it describes is first built. Hence it can in principle happen either before or after A-movement. That assumption works here in Amharic too. The accusative rule does not apply before the theme moves to Spec,TP, because the goal does not c-command the theme, being embedded in PP (see (39)). The configuration described in (3) then does hold after the theme moves to SpecTP, and accusative is assigned to the affected argument. This can be contrasted with a transitive structure in which the object is scrambled to a position before the subject (like (7c)). Then accusative is assigned to the object immediately when the subject is merged in Spec, vP. The object then can move to a higher position, but it takes its accusative case with it. It does not trigger accusative case on the subject, since (3) does not apply if the higher NP is already marked for case. So NP movement feeds case assignment in structures like (38), but not in certain other cases. (Other assumptions about timing would probably also work here. For example, one could say that (3) always applies at Spell Out (after movement) but it only considers copies of NPs in A-positions. That would, however, force me toward the view that clause internal scrambling is always A-bar movement in Amharic—an issue that has not been investigated, as far as I know. I thank Ruth Kramer (personal communication) for pressing me to clarify this matter.)

²¹ Topicalization of the affectee in sentences like (36) seems to be preferred, but not absolutely required; I have a similar sentence with theme-affectee order (with the passive of ‘tell’, see also (45b)). Conversely, A-bar fronting of the theme is possible to give theme-affectee order in sentences like (37a) and (41a), but this is less preferred. Given the possibility information structure-movements, then, case and agreement are more reliable indications of the structural positions of nominals than surface word order in sentences like these.

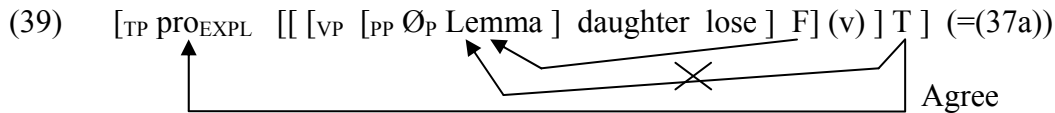
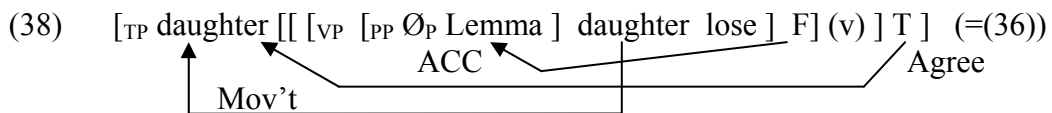
‘Lemma lost his daughter.’

b. (?)Sost lidz-otfif all-ə-nɲ

three child-PL exist-3mS-1sO

‘I have three children.’

We may take these to be examples in which an expletive is inserted in Spec, TP and T agrees with that. Notice that neither argument is accusative in (37). This is expected: the affectee is c-commanded only by the expletive, not by an argument, and the theme is not c-commanded by the affectee given that the affectee is embedded in PP. Hence (3) does not mark either NP as accusative. The two outcomes are summarized in (38) and (39):²²



²² One anonymous reviewer expresses some concern that I attribute a significant structural difference to (38), (39), and (41), when the only apparent difference is in case and agreement. In particular, I assume that the affected argument is in a topic position in (36) but not (necessarily) in (37a), and that the theme is in SpecTP in (36) but not in (37a), this underlying the differences in case and agreement. While I do not presently have independent evidence for these differences, my view tentatively predicts that other relevant differences between sentences like (36) and (37a) may come to light—say differences in quantifier scope, or binding theory, or information structure—confirming the structural difference. If this proves false, one might want to look for simpler alternatives. It is clear, however, that one does *not* want to account for the differences between (36), (37a), and (41)) simply by saying that accusative marking and agreement on T/Asp in gender and number are optional in Amharic *in general*. That would be false: accusative case is obligatory on a name functioning as the object of a transitive verb (like (2)), and number-gender agreement on T/Asp is obligatory with the argument of a simple unaccusative (like (1)). We must say, then, that it is something about this particular kind of structure that these things become (apparently) optional just here in Amharic. My account in terms of how the EPP feature of T is to be satisfied has this desirable property.

Ruth Kramer (personal communication) reminds me that the possessive construction with *allə* in (22c) is a bit different from the others in that it does not allow accusative on the possessor (affectee) argument, so there is no (36)-like analog of (37b), although there is a (41)-like analog. Within my analysis, this suggests that the derivation in (38) is not allowed for this verb. I have no particular insight into why this should be, other than to observe that similar restrictions are found with special locative-existential-possessive verbs in other languages (e.g., French *Il y a trois hommes ici* ‘There are three men here’ but **Trois hommes y a ici* ‘Three men are here’).

It is instructive to compare these Amharic structures with similar ones in the related Semitic language Hebrew, as analyzed by Preminger (2009). Like Amharic, Hebrew has unaccusative verbs that appear with an affected argument as well as a theme, and such structures can be realized in at least two ways, shown in (40).

- (40) a. Nafl-al le-Dani ha-cincenet. (or *nafl-a* ‘fell-3fS’)
 fell-3mS DAT-Dani the-jar(FEM)
 ‘Dani’s jar fell on him.’
- b. Ha-cincenet nafl-a le-Dani. (**nafl-al* ‘fell-3mS’)
 the-jar(FEM) fell-3fS DAT-Dani
 ‘Dani’s jar fell on him.’

The optionality of moving the theme to Spec, TP is more apparent in Hebrew than in Amharic, because of its head-initial character: that movement clearly happens in (40b) but not (40a). As in Amharic, this difference goes along with a difference in agreement: agreement on T with the theme is required in (40b), but not in (40a), which can have default agreement, arguably with an expletive *pro* in Spec, TP. One difference between the two languages is that Amharic has object agreement (with the affectee) and Hebrew does not. The other difference is case-theoretic: the affectee in Hebrew always has dative case, whereas dative is not assigned in this context in Amharic.²³ Rather, the accusative case rule in (3) applies if and only if the theme raises to Spec, TP.

Interestingly, there is a third option in both Amharic and Hebrew. Preminger reports that it is possible for the verb to agree with the theme argument even if the theme has not raised to Spec, TP, as indicated in (40a). The Amharic equivalent would be

²³ Preminger also assumes that the dative NP in (41) originates as a possessor inside the theme, whereas I see no compelling need to assume this for Amharic (although I do not rule out the possibility either).

examples in which the verb shows Type 1 agreement with the theme, but accusative case is not triggered on the affectee. Indeed, this is also possible, as shown in (41); in fact, this is easy to elicit and may be the most common realization of this type of structure.

(41) Ləmma sejt **liɖz-u** t'əffa-tʃtʃ -əw.

Lemma female child-DEF lose-3fS-3mO

‘Lemma lost his daughter.’

Preminger argues that this is possible in Hebrew when the theme undergoes a short movement, not moving higher than the affectee, but just high enough that the two are equidistant from T (it moves to an inner Spec of ApplP, in his terms). I tentatively assume that this is possible in Amharic as well.²⁴ The choice of these various derivations accounts for the apparent optionality of accusative case on the affectee in these dyadic unaccusative constructions: accusative case marking is obligatory whenever possible, but three slightly different derivations are available from the same underlying source.²⁵

We can return now to a loose end from above. Amberber (2002, 2005) says that accusative case marking is optionally possible not only on the affectee of dyadic verbs and passivized ditransitive verbs, but even on the sole argument of monadic experiencer

²⁴ One would need to say why this short movement is not possible in ditransitive constructions, however, allowing F to agree with the theme rather than the goal. An alternative might be to say that null headed PPs may or may not count as defective interveners between T and the theme NP, depending on what features are attributed to the PP. Also to be clarified is how the EPP feature of T is satisfied in (41).

What is not allowed in Hebrew is for the theme to raise to Spec, TP without T agreeing with it ((40b)). The Amharic equivalent would be a structure in which the affectee is accusative but there is no Type 1 agreement with the theme. Indeed, this combination of properties was rejected by my consultant.

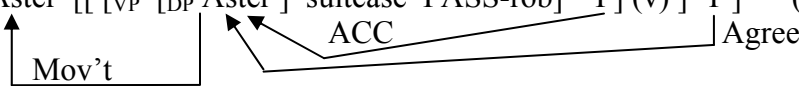
²⁵ One residual question about these dyadic nonagentive structures, raised by two anonymous reviewers, is how is the theme argument licensed in the (39) version of the structure, given that neither F or T agrees with it, nor is it case marked by (3). One might think, then, that it should be ruled out by the Case filter or its current descendants. I do not have a definitive answer to this beyond that the data show that the structure is possible. One possibility is that default nominative case is freely available in Amharic. Another (almost equivalent) is that there is simply no Case filter-like licensing condition active in Amharic syntax; see Marantz (1991), McFadden (2004), and related work for this view. A third is that some kind of special licensing is available for (some) theme arguments, related to what I and others have called abstract or pseudo noun incorporation (see Baker 2011 for some evidence of pseudo-incorporation in Amharic). I do not currently have a principled basis for choosing among these theoretical options.

verbs like (22). Why is this? In fact, as observed by Leslau (1995:435) and Amberber (personal communication), these verbs need not be monadic after all. Many of them are also possible with a cognate argument related to the verb stem, as shown in (42).

- (42) Rab rab-ə-ᵛᵛ. (compare (22b))
 hunger hunger-3mS-1sO
 ‘I’m hungry’, lit. ‘Hunger hungered to me.’

Cognate arguments usually occupy the theme slot of verb, presumably for principled reasons (e.g., English *I danced a dance*). So *rab* ‘hunger’ in (42) is presumably an experiencer-theme verb, similar to ‘lose’ or ‘die’. As such, we expect accusative case to be optional on the affectee argument, depending on whether *rab* ‘hunger’ moves to Spec, TP or not. (This has no visible effect on agreement, because ‘hunger’, like most nonhuman nouns, is masculine singular). We may assume, then, that the examples in (22), in the (less common) versions when they have accusative case on the experiencer, have a pro-dropped cognate NP in Spec, TP. The seemingly monadic experiencer verbs may thus converge with the dyadic ones, if these cognate arguments are widespread.

Finally, for completeness, consider the passive of a triadic verb like ‘rob’, whose middle argument is a direct one, NP rather than PP. These are essentially like a simple unaccusative or passive construction. The structure is:

- (43) [TP Aster [[[VP [DP Aster] suitcase PASS-rob] F] (v)] T] (= (17))


F agrees with the higher internal argument, the source, as usual. But T can also agree with this argument, because it is not in a PP; indeed, it must because it is the closest NP to T as well. The verb shows subject agreement with the source, and object agreement

with the source is suppressed at PF (Kinyalolo's Constraint). Neither T nor F can agree with the theme, because the source intervenes, so the theme is not agreed with at all. The source raises to SpecTP to satisfy the EPP. It is thus higher than the theme both before and after NP movement, so there is no doubt about how accusative case assignment applies: the theme 'suitcase' must be marked accusative. The cluster of differences that distinguish the passive of 'rob' from the passive of 'give' thus follow on this approach.

I conclude that this is a successful view of what the direct/oblique distinction in Amharic amounts to. When this is cashed out as a matter of whether the argument is projected as a simple NP or a null headed PP, the differences with respect to case and agreement can be made to follow without wholesale changes to the principles of case and agreement that apply in simple transitive structures, as desired.

6 Issues arising

The main goal of this chapter has been to argue for an oblique/direct distinction in the argument structure of verbs in Amharic, and to show how that distinction plays out in the syntax. This distinction, if accepted, raises several interesting theoretical questions. Here I mention some of these and make a few brief and tentative remarks about them.

6.1 Is obliqueness semantically predictable?

One question is whether the oblique/direct distinction is semantically predictable or lexically idiosyncratic. If it is the latter, then it must presumably be marked explicitly in the argument structures of particular verbs. Then verbs must have argument structure.

In fact, the data I have seems to pull both ways. On the one hand, only "affectees" have the option of being oblique; canonical agents and themes apparently do not. Amberber (2002:23) cites verbs like 'think' as either taking a direct argument

(*assəb-h^w* ‘think.PF-1sS’) or an oblique one (*t-assəb-ə-ɲɲ* ‘PASS-think.PF-3mS-1sO’), and this goes along with a difference in meaning: the first form means ‘I thought about something’ (agentive subject), the second ‘It occurred to me’ (experiencer subject). Similarly, we saw above that source arguments of triadic verbs are direct, whereas goal arguments of triadic verbs are oblique. But, on the other hand, the literature also gives minimal pairs with no identified semantic difference. Leslau (1995:436) says that ‘become tired’ can be an impersonal verb or a simple unaccusative with no obvious change of meaning; Amberber (2002:20) says something similar for ‘worry’, among others. It is possible that the sole argument of these verbs is sometimes a theme (hence direct) and sometimes an experiencer (hence oblique), but we have no evidence yet to support such a thematic difference. Furthermore, the source argument of a verb like ‘rob’ can be semantically very similar to the malefactive argument of the applicative form of the same verb. This is illustrated by the pair in (44), where a native speaker would not necessarily distinguish sharply the meanings.

(44) a. Ləm̩ma Aster-ɪn gənzəb sərrəkʰ-at. (cf. (9))

Lemma.M Aster.F-ACC money rob-(3mS)-3fO

‘Lemma robbed Aster of money.’

b. Ləm̩ma Aster-ɪn gənzəb sərrəkʰ-ə-bb-at.

Lemma.M Aster.F-ACC money rob-3mS-on-3fO

‘Lemma robbed money from/against Aster.’

Nevertheless, the source argument is direct, and the malefactive argument is oblique, as becomes evident when the two constructions are passivized, as in (45). For example, the affectee triggers subject agreement in (45a), but object agreement in (45b).

(45) a. **Aster** ʃantʰa-wa-n tə-sərrəkʰ-ətʃɪʃ. (= (17))

Aster.F suitcase-3fP-ACC PASS-rob-3fS

‘Aster was robbed of her suitcase.’

b. Gənzəb-u **Aster-in** tə-sərrək’-ə-bb-at. (contrast also (19))

money-DEF Aster.F-ACC PASS-rob-3mS-on-3fO

‘The money was stolen on Aster.’

Nor do I have a principled theory of why goals should project PP structure whereas sources do not in this language, to make the difference a principled one.²⁶ More detailed lexical semantic work on a verb-by-verb basis is needed to clarify this issue.

6.2 *Why can only certain arguments be oblique?*

A second question is why only affectees—such as the middle arguments of ditransitive verbs—have the option of being oblique. Why doesn’t this option exist for highest arguments (agents), or for lowest arguments (themes)? Here I simply toss out a conjecture. Suppose that, in fact, arguments with affectee type theta-roles are always projected in the SpecApplP position, one of the two options I left open in the main discussion. Then the fact that they are middle arguments follows from the position of Appl in the functional structure of the clause: above VP (which contains the theme) but below *v* (which selects the agent). Now perhaps only Appl can license a null-headed PP (of the transparent type; cf. note 17), because the Appl head itself has essentially the same meaning as a P (e.g., $\lambda x \lambda e$ benefactive(*x*, *e*)):

²⁶ An anonymous reviewer asks if there could be a language which is the opposite of Amharic, in which goals are direct and sources are oblique. I do not know; probably much more data from a variety of languages needs to be collected before this becomes clear. But consider the difference between (i) and (ii), which exists (to varying degrees) in many versions of English:

- (i) John was given a book.
- (ii) ??John was made a sandwich. (cf. I made John a sandwich)

One might consider the somewhat mysterious deviance of (ii) to be an effect of (30a-c), as in Amharic. If so, then goal arguments are direct in English and benefactives are oblique. This would be a fairly stable thematic distinction, but a different one from the one that seems to hold in Amharic.

Note also that English does not allow source arguments to be projected as either NP or PP with null P, but only as overt PPs. This is striking in an example like *John stole Mary a bicycle*, which can only mean that John stole a bicycle *for* Mary, not that he stole it *from* her, as is possible in Amharic and other languages. So the particular source-goal contrast in Amharic may well not be universal.

compare Parsons 1990:14 on *for* with Pyllkanen 2008:12 on Appl). The possibility of synonymy between Appl and P might make Appl uniquely able to license a null P by something like Emonds's (1987) Invisible Category Principle. Then SpecApplP could be NP or PP, but other argument positions would consistently be NP.

6.3 *Is the oblique-direct distinction universal?*

The next question is whether the oblique/direct distinction is something particular to Amharic, or whether it is universal, present in all languages. First impressions suggest that it is not universal: there seems to be no comparable distinction in the Bantu languages, for example. Chichewa has no known monadic verbs whose argument triggers object agreement rather than subject agreement. Even psych verbs show subject agreement with their argument:

- (46) **A-kazi a-dza-zunzik-a.** (Mchombo, 2004: 37)
 2-women 2S-T-suffer-FV
 'The women will suffer.'

Nor do the Bantu languages have triadic verbs whose goals resist moving to the subject position and agreeing with T, the way Amharic does (compare with (16) above):

- (47) a. Mbuzi zi-na-pats-idw-a nsima. (Baker, 1988:282)
 goats SP-T-give-PASS-FV cornmush
 'The goats were given cornmush.'
- b. *Nsima i-na-pats-idw-a mbuzi.
 cornmush SP-T-give-PASS-FV goats
 'The goats were given cornmush.'

What is the nature of this crosslinguistic difference?

An obvious possibility is simply that arguments are never marked oblique in Bantu; there is no \emptyset_P . That would be a significant difference in the kinds of argument structures allowed in one language as compared to another, possibly confirming the need for argument structure within the theory, where the difference can be expressed.

But there is another option. One might say that argument structures in Bantu are the same as in Amharic and the parametric difference is in (30c): an NP can move out of a null-headed PP to Spec, TP in Bantu. If so, there will be no objection to T agreeing with this argument in Bantu (even though (30b) does hold in Bantu; see (31)).

Indeed, a scrap of evidence for this second version might be gleaned from Baker 1988. There I observed that the goal argument of a ditransitive verb resists *wh*-movement in Chichewa, as in English.

- (48) *Iyi ndiyo mfumu imene ndi-ku-ganiz-a kuti Mavuto
 this is chief which 1sS-T-think-FV that Mavuto
 a-na-umb-ir-a -- mtsuko. (Baker 1988: 290)
 SP-T-mold-APPL-FV waterpot.

‘This is the chief that I think that Mavuto molded a waterpot ??(for).’

I attributed this to the presence of a null P governing the goal/benefactive argument; see also Landau (2007, 2010) for very similar claims. Now what happens when this argument moves to the subject position in passive, as allowed in Chichewa (and sometimes English)? To the extent that this is possible, the difficulty in extraction seems to go away: the moved goal is extractable to the same degree that a normal subject is:

- (49) a. I think that the chief was given/?molded a waterpot.
 b. This is the chief that I think was given/?molded a waterpot.

That is what one would expect if goal passives in Chichewa and English separate the goal NP from the null PP that originally contained it. This evidence is only suggestive, though, because a full account of the effect in (49) remains elusive, and because the sort of evidence that motivates the null P in Chichewa and English is quite different from that which motivates the null P in Amharic. We therefore need to be somewhat cautious about combining the two analysis fragments.²⁷

6.4 Possible implications for projectionism versus constructionism

Finally, we can ask what bearing this material might have on current debates about whether verbs have argument structures from which syntactic structure is projected, or whether syntactic structure is freely constructed, with verbs slotted in to give results that are more or less felicitous depending on real world knowledge. Unfortunately, I suspect that the answer to this question depends on the questions raised earlier in this section about how the material covered here fits into a larger picture—points on which I have been less than definitive. But at least we can think through what we are looking for.

At a minimum, constructionism will have to evolve somewhat to account for data like that discussed. The way that constructionism has been done so far, in say the work of Borer (2005), is to have NP arguments of all kinds introduced directly into the specifiers of relevant functional categories. Strictly adhered to, this gives differences in hierarchical position, but no obvious equivalent to my direct-oblique distinction. The material here shows that something more is needed, in the form of PP structure for some such arguments but not others. We would need, then, some new ways of introducing arguments into syntactic structure.

²⁷ Note, for example, that the text interpretation of (48) and (49) is probably not compatible with the suggestion for English mentioned in note 26. Adopting that too, we would then have to say that goal arguments can strand a null P, but benefactive ones cannot, and it is not obvious why that should be.

But if it turns out that the oblique-direct distinction is both semantically motivated (section 6.1) and universal (section 6.3), then the change might prove to be a minor one. One could say that a particular structure which includes a null PP has such and such interpretation in all languages (or perhaps in a parametrically defined subset of languages). Some verbs may be more naturally compatible that meaning than others are (e.g., ‘tell’, but not ‘rob’), hence more compatible with the structure. But that could be taken to be a feature of our knowledge of the real world properties of telling events as opposed to robbing events, not something that requires a true argument structure as that has traditionally been understood. Then the new factor argued for here could be adopted by constructionists as a friendly amendment, compatible with their leading ideas.

But if it turns out that which arguments are oblique and which are direct varies somewhat idiosyncratically within a certain subdomain of lexical items in Amharic, then one needs to record that not-fully-predictable lexical information somewhere. A traditional argument structure would be the obvious place to do so. Moreover, if it turns out that languages differ somewhat as to which classes of arguments are to be treated as direct and which as oblique, that too needs to be recorded somehow in the native speaker’s knowledge of the particular language. Again, the argument structures of particular verbs (or generalizations over them) might be the best place to do this. If so, then some notion of argument structure may prove necessary.

Which is correct? If I had to place a bet, I would place it in favor of argument structure. It seems likely that the direct-oblique distinction is not 100% semantically predictable in Amharic, and that there is a real difference here between Amharic and some other languages. But I am not ready to bet very much yet. The more important

point is that we should find out, because this might prove to be a way of investigating these broad conceptual questions about argument structure in an empirical way.

7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that verbs in Amharic need to be classified for something more than the number of arguments that they take and the relative hierarchical order of those arguments. Certain verbs also need to be classified as to whether one of their arguments is “direct” or “oblique”, projected as an NP or as a null headed PP. These two kinds of arguments behave quite differently for purposes of agreement, movement, and case. I claimed that the differences trace ultimately to the fact that the PP arguments cannot satisfy T’s EPP property, hence they resist subject agreement but not object agreement. Whether the oblique/direct contrast is predictable from lexical semantics, and whether it is universal or particular to Amharic, are significant questions for further research to clarify. How these questions turn out may well bear on whether reductionist approaches that deny the need for traditional argument structures are sufficient or not.

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