Asymmetrical Symmetry in Tigrinya Object Marking

Jason Overfelt, *Oakland University*

1. Overview. Languages generally fit into one of two categories—*symmetrical* or *asymmetrical*—on the basis of the behavior of objects in ditransitive structures (e.g., Bresnan & Moshi 1990, van der Wal 2018). With respect to object marking (OM) on lexical verbs, Tigrinya (Ethio-semitic; Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia; SOV) appears to be a symmetrical object language, allowing either the Goal or Theme to be cross-referenced. This paper argues that, despite initial appearances, Tigrinya is an asymmetrical object language that employs two distinct ditransitive frames. It is argued that these frames are obscured by a surface ambiguity, but are reliably betrayed by the observed OM pattern. This analysis provides a way of understanding some unexpected optionality of object marking in ditransitive constructions. It also correctly predicts that various interpretive and structural asymmetries correlate with the observed OM pattern. OM in Tigrinya, which shows surface symmetry but deep asymmetry, therefore serves a cautionary role in the classification of languages as either symmetrical or asymmetrical.

2. Background on Tigrinya. Tigrinya is a Differential Object Marking (DOM) language that obligatorily marks definite/specific DPs with the prefix [n(ɨ)-] (Nazareth 2007, 2011). As shown in (1), objects with DOM undergo object shift.

(1)   ʔɨt-i   səbʔaj [**n**-ət-a   dəbdabe]$_1$ sənuj x_1 tsɨħif-u-wa
       that-MS man   N-that-FS letter   Monday   write-GER-S.3MS-O.3FS
       'The man wrote the letter on Monday.'

The object of a transitive predicate with DOM is obligatorily cross-referenced by OM; see (2). Without DOM, the object in (3) cannot be cross-referenced by OM (Nazareth 2011).

(2)   ʔɨt-i   səbaj **n**-ət-a   dəbdabe tsɨħif-u- *(**wa**)
       that-MS man   N-that-FS letter   GER.write-S.3MS-O.3FS
       'The man wrote the letter.'

(3)   ʔɨt-i   səbaj dəbdabe tsɨħif-u- (***wa**)
       that-MS man   letter   GER.write-S.3MS
       'The man wrote a letter.'

OM in Tigrinya displays suspected properties of both agreement and cliticization, like the closely related language Amharic (Kramer 2014, Baker & Kramer 2018). For the purpose of the abstract, and because it is not crucial to the analysis, I will be intentionally vague regarding the identity of the OM morpheme. However, I assume with Baker & Kramer (2018), van der Wal (2018), and others that OM is the realization of an AGREE relationship between a functional head and the cross-referenced DP (e.g., Chomsky 2001). Still following the research cited above, I assume that the relevant head is a relatively low functional verbal head v^0.

3. Asymmetrical Symmetry. With respect to OM, Tigrinya superficially behaves like a symmetrical object language. When both arguments of a lexical ditransitive predicate satisfy the conditions for OM, either the Goal or Theme argument can be cross-referenced; see (4).

(4)   ʔɨt-a   gʷal n-ət-a   dəbdabe n-ət-i   wədi hib-a- **to/ta**
       that-FS girl   N-that-FS letter   N-that-MS boy   GER.give-S.3FS-O.3MS/3FS
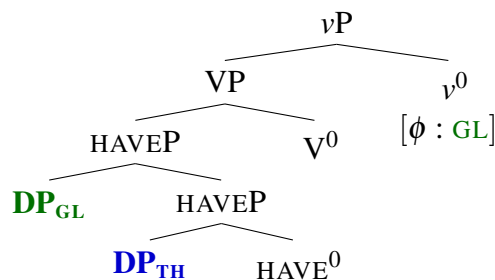   'The girl gave the boy the letter.'

This makes Tigrinya ditransitive constructions markedly different than Amharic ditransitives, where only the Goal can be cross-referenced by OM (Baker 2012, Kramer 2014). This raises the initial puzzle of how Tigrinya differs from Amharic. The second puzzle arises from unexpected optionality with the Goal. When only the Goal meets the conditions for OM, as in (5), cross-referencing it with OM is merely optional. This unexpected optionality of OM is not simply a property of ditransitive constructions. When only the Theme meets the conditions for OM, as in (6), it is obligatorily cross-referenced by OM, similar to what was observed in (2).

(5) ʔit-a gʷal n-ət-i wədi dəbdabe hib-a-**(to)**
that-FS girl N-that-MS boy letter GER.give-S.3FS-O.3MS
'The girl gave the boy a letter.'

(6) ʔit-i gʷal n-ət-a dəbdabe n-wədi hib-a-***(ta)**
that-FS girl N-that-FS letter N-boy GER.give-S.3FS-O.3FS
'The girl gave the letter to a boy.'

The questions to be answered, then, are what leads to the symmetrical behavior in (4) and why does otherwise obligatory OM become optional on Goals in lexical ditransitive constructions.

4. Hidden Argument Structure Alternations. I argue that the apparent optionality in (4) and the asymmetry between (5) and (6) betray the availability in Tigrinya of two asymmetric ditransitive frames. These two frames are otherwise concealed by a surface ambiguity of the prefix [n(ɨ)-] on the Goal as the DOM morpheme or a preposition.

(7) *Tigrinya double-object frame* (8) *Tigrinya PP-object frame*
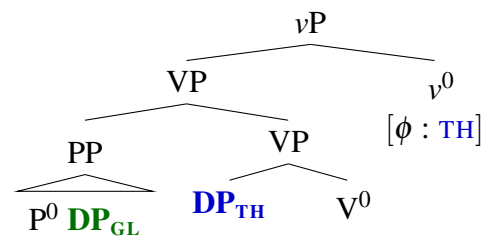
The OM patterns can be understood as the result of probing the highest direct argument. In the double-object frame in (7) (e.g., Kayne 1984) the Goal is the highest direct argument and, as such, can be cross-referenced by OM. In the PP-object frame in (8) (e.g., Miyagawa & Tsujioka 2004) the Goal is an indirect argument, meaning the Theme can be cross-referenced by OM. The "optionality" in (4) and (5), therefore, reflects whether the Goal is a direct or indirect argument. The necessity of OM in (6) reflects the fact that the Theme is always a direct argument.

5. Structure Sensitive Predictions. The analysis proposes that Goal OM on a lexical ditransitive betrays the frame in (7) and Theme OM betrays the frame in (8). This correctly predicts interpretive and structural asymmetries that correlate with the observed OM.

For instance, the Goal in the double-object frame in (7) is proposed to be the subject of a possessive small clause HAVEP. This correctly predicts, as shown in (9), that an inanimate Goal will be infelicitous only when it is cross-referenced by OM (e.g., Beck & Johnson 2004).

(9) ʔit-a gʷal n-ət-ən dəbdabe ni-ʔasməra sədid-a-**#ta/tən**
that-FS girl N-that-FP letter N-Asmara GER.send-S.3FS-O.3FS/3FP
'The girl sent {#Asmara the letter/the letter to Asmara}.'

Second, the Goal in the PP-object frame in (8) should fail to c-command the Theme. This correctly predicts that the Goal will fail to license reflexives inside the Theme argument only when the Theme is cross-referenced by OM. An example is provided in (10).

(10) ʔit-a gʷal **nɨ**-kefi₁ **n**-ət-ən naj [gəzaʔ riʔisu]₁ siʔil-tat hib-a-**to/*tən**
that-FS girl N-Keffy.M N-that-FP of self-3MS picture-P GER.give-S.3FS-O.3MS
'The girl gave {Keffy₁ the pictures of himself₁/*the picture of himself₁ to Keffy₁}.'

6. Extensions. The remainder of the paper demonstrates how object shift derives the observed order of the Goal and the Theme. On-going research is considering the nature of prepositions/case markers in Tigrinya and Amharic (Baker & Kramer 2014) as the contributing factor for the apparent absence of the PP-object frame in Amharic and its availability in Tigrinya.

Selected References. Baker, M. C. & R. Kramer. 2018. *NLLT* 36:1035–1088. ● Nazareth, A. K. 2011. Ph.D. Diss, Bergen. ● van der Wal, J. 2018. In *Order and Structure in Syntax II*.