

Variable tightness of converbiality in Amharic

A commonly made distinction in the converb literature is that between adverbial (modifying) and chaining (non-modifying) converbs (e.g., Haspelmath and König 1995; Genetti 2005; Coupe 2006: 145). Haspelmath draws a sharp distinction between adverbial *subordinate* converbs, typical of European languages, and chaining *cosubordinate* converbs, attested in many Asian and Papuan languages (1995: esp. 20–27). However, linguists working on Asian and Papuan languages have observed “systematic conflation—or at least some overlap—between modifying and chaining functions” (Bickel 1998: 385). Some scholars (e.g., Johanson (1995) for Turkic, Genetti (2005) for Dolakhā Newar (Tibeto-Burman)) argue for a unified syntactic treatment subsuming both functions together, whereby adverbial vs. chaining converbiality is a matter of semantics, not of syntax.

Amharic, a verb-final Ethiosemitic language, makes extensive use of converbs (which always mark person/number/gender) in functions that are traditionally called chaining and adverbial (notably causal and temporal) functions. Thus, with the converb *zärzaro* ‘having listed/detailed’:

(1) Chaining function

yä-adäga mänsä 'e-(w)-očč-(ə)-n zärzər-o wädä lela rə'əs gäbba-ø
GEN-accident cause-PL-ACC list\CNV-3SM to another topic enter\PFV-3SM
‘Having listed the causes of the accident, he entered (into) another topic’

(2) Adverbial function (causality)

yä-adäga mänsä 'e-(w)-očč-(ə)-n zärzər-o poliso-čč-u-n
GEN-accident cause-PL-ACC list\CNV-3SM policeman-PL-DEF-ACC
aggäz-(ä)-aččäw
help\PFV-3SM-OBJ.3PL
‘By virtue of having listed the causes of the accident, he helped the policemen’

However, the dichotomy illustrated by (1) and (2) does not exhaust the phenomenon. Amharic has a third type of converb construction, which is the target of this paper. It is always adverbial, and clearly characterized by its own distinctive features (prosodic, morphosyntactic and semantic) that differentiate it from both (1) and (2)—even though morphologically the selfsame converb form is involved. Thus (3):

(3) *yä-adäga mänsä 'e-(w)-očč-(ə)-n zärzər-o näggär-ä-w*
GEN-accident cause-PL-ACC list\CNV-3SM tell\PFV-3SM-OBJ.3SM
‘He told him in detail (i.e. listing) the causes of the accident’

Despite their difference in meaning, I will treat sentences (1) and (2) as both representing the same fundamental type: “loose” converbiality. In contrast, sentence (3) represents a distinct type: “tight” converbiality. Intuitively, the point is how tightly the converb clause is integrated into the sentence as a whole. Tight converbs (always adverbial) are much closer to lexical adverbs than are loose converbs, sometimes even grammaticalizing into adverbs. Semantically, tight converbs could be considered a type of adverbial converbs but for convenience I will call them simply “tight converbs”. This adds a new dimension to the study of converbs, which may prove to have broader typological significance.

The loose/tight distinction crosscuts the notion of adverbiality. It manifests itself in all three domains: prosody, morphosyntax, and semantics. Prosodically, with loose converbality, sentence-level stress occurs twice, falling on both the converb and the governing verb; with tight converbality, only on the governing verb. Moreover, with loose converbality the two verbs may be separated by a pause, but not with tight converbality. Morphosyntactically, tight converbs, unlike their loose counterparts, do not accept any pronominal object markers, nor do they allow any argument or adjunct to intervene between them and the governing verb. Additionally, while the subject of a loose converb may differ from that of the governing verb, with a tight converb the two subjects must be coreferential. Semantically, tight converbs, like “simple” adverbs, require the following governing verb to belong to a restricted, lexically-determined semantic class; loose converbs involve no such lexical restrictions.

The objective of my paper is thus to demonstrate how Amharic converbs show flexibility regarding tightness/looseness, and can participate in various types of clause linking within a broadly defined ambit of “subordination”. Furthermore, preliminary examination of the two types loose/tight shows that there is a significant difference in their behaviour regarding several typological parameters proposed by Bickel (2010) as important in the specification of different clause-linking types, such as the scope of various operators (notably question and negation), as well as the position, and layer of attachment of the converb.

Abbreviations

ACC–accusative, CNV–converb, DEF–definite article, GEN–genitive, M–masculine, OBJ–object, PFV–perfective, PL–plural, POSS–possessive, S–singular, 3–third person

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