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Article

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Introduction

Amharic belongs to the transversal group of the South Ethiopian Semitic branch of the Ethiopian Semitic subfamily, the Semitic family of the Afroasiatic phylum. According to the Population Census Commission, Ethiopian people speak Amharic as a first language. It is the second most populous Semitic language after Arabic. It was the only language of education in Ethiopian primary schools and the most prestigious and dominant language in Ethiopia until 1991. It serves as a de facto lingua franca in major cities and towns of the country, and is the working language of the federal government. Although there are monolingual speakers of Amharic in various major towns and cities of the country, including Addis Ababa, native Amharic speakers live in the core Amhara areas such as Gondar, Godgdayam, (North) Jawa and Wallo.

In this article, I identify and examine the linguistic forms employed in basic locative constructions in the sense of Levinson and Wilkins’ topological relations. The term ‘basic locative construction’ refers to the construction used in a basic locative function. It focuses on responses to ‘where-questions’ (i.e. ‘where is the X?’).

The data were mainly collected through elicitation. The process has been supported by Bowerman and Pederson’s topological relations picture series

3 Girma Awgichew Demke 2009, 2; Hudson 1997, 457.
4 Meyer 2006, 129.
6 In Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, those who were born and have grown there are monolingual speakers of Amharic.
8 Levinson and Wilkins 2006a; 2006b.
9 Levinson and Wilkins 2006a, 514; 2006b, 15.
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(henceforth TRPS). This stimuli kit, which includes a one-page instruction sheet, has been prepared to obtain linguistic expressions of spatial relations between figure and ground entities. Many linguists all over the world use the task in their fieldwork. Regarding the procedure, I follow the instructions mentioned in the material. For the elicitation, eight male and seven female native speakers of Amharic from different core Amhara areas have been consulted. Moreover, intuitive data was used in a few instances because the author is a native speaker of the language.

The article consistently uses IPA symbols in the transcription and the linguistic data is glossed based on the Leipzig glossing rules and the use of three-line glossing. The first line is the phonemic transcription; the second is the linear morphological analysis; the third is the free translation. However, when there is a phonological or morphophonemic process, the phonetic form of the word is given in square brackets following its phonemic form.

Languages of the world deploy different classes of linguistic units (e.g. adpositions, nominal predices, case inflections, locative verbs) when expressing basic location. Ameka and Levinson identified four basic typological types of locative predication based on the size and semantic type of verbs used in basic locative construction (i.e. Type 0, Type I, Type II, and Type III). Type 0 includes languages that do not have verbs in a locative statement (e.g. Saliba, Austronesia, Papua New Guinea). Type I refers to languages that have a single locative verb (or suppletion under grammatical conditioning). The locative verb can be (1) copula (e.g. English, Tamil, Chukchi, Tiriyó) or (2) locative (+existential) (e.g. Japanese, Ewe, Yukatek). Type II languages are those that employ a small contrastive set of locative verbs (three to seven verbs). The verbs can be (1) postural verbs (e.g. Arrente, Dutch, Goemai) or (2) verbs denoting ground space (e.g. Tidore). Type III includes languages that use a large set of dispositional verbs (nine to one hundred verbs; e.g. Tezetal, Zapotee, German). They claim that languages related in terms of genetics, typology, and area can belong to different types of locative predication typology. Genetically close-related languages, such as Dutch and German, belong to Type II (six verbs) and Type III (ten verbs) respectively.

11 Levinson and Wilkins 2006b, 16.
13 Ibid., 864.
1 Basic Locative Constructions

Basic locative construction refers to responses of where-questions, namely ‘where is the figure with respect to the ground entity’. Amharic mainly uses spatial adpositions (i.e. prepositions and postpositions) with a copula or a locative (+existential) verb in basic locative constructions.\(^{14}\) In the literature, the Amharic prepositions, including the spatial prepositions, are treated in two ways: (1) as separate words,\(^{15}\) and (2) as semantic case markers.\(^ {16}\) In this study, the former is followed. This is due to their being optional, which they would not be were they case markers like the accusative or genitive cases.

As mentioned above, Amharic uses copulas in locative constructions. The copulas are \(nǝ-,\) ‘be’, \(all-,\) ‘exist’,\(^ {17}\) and \(nǝbbǝr-,\) ‘be.PST’, ‘exist.PST’.\(^ {18}\) The first two are used in present-tense expressions. The latter, however, is the suppletive form and used in past-tense expressions. This implies that Amharic employs two copulas in locational expressions. All such copulas are accompanied by various suffixes indicating person, gender, and number.\(^ {19}\) Amharic can also use the locative verb \(ji-t\-gǝɲɲ\,all > [ji-gǝɲɲ\-all],\) ‘be found’. Note that the copulas and the locative verb compete almost equally for locative constructions. When observing the typology of Amharic locative predicates, it emerges that Amharic does not fit Ameka and Levinson’s typology,\(^ {20}\) as they do not include languages of more than one copula in their typological classifications.

The basic locative construction in Amharic is of the form noun phrase expressing figure followed by an adpositional phrase denoting site and, finally, the copulas or the existential verb. The adpositional phrase can be made up of (1) the spatial preposition and the ground nominal, or (2) the ground nominal and the spatial postposition, or (3) the spatial preposition, ground nominal, and the postposition. When both the spatial preposition and postposition co-occur in a single locative statement, they have hierarchical syntactic relations. First, spatial prepositions and postpositions are

\(^{14}\) A reviewer commented that the verb \(tǝgǝɲɲ/ji-gǝɲɲ\,all,\) ‘exist’, can be used in basic locative constructions, with which I agree.


\(^{17}\) It is an existential copula but it can also be used in locational expressions.


\(^{19}\) Bayyo Yimam 2016–2017, 135.

now to be described in separate subsections; then I will proceed to a discussion on how they are coordinated.

1.1 Spatial Prepositions

In Amharic, basic location can be expressed by using the spatial prepositions *kǝ*- and *ɨ*, ‘at’. These prepositions have a general locative function; they do not show specific types of topological relations between the figure and the ground. This means that they convey a dimensionless position of the figure. Amharic speakers usually use *kǝ*- or *ɨ*-interchangeably in situations where the noun of the ground begins with a consonant. When the ground noun begins with a vowel, they use *kǝ*-. For illustration, consider utterances 1, 2, and 3.

1) *ɨrsǝs-u*  
   *i/kǝ=t’琬p’eza-u*  
   *laj nǝ-u*,\(^{\text{22}}\)  
   *[i/kǝ=t’琬p’eza]**  
   pencil-DEF at=table-DEF  
   on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}\(^{\text{22}}\)  
   ‘The pencil is on the table’ (TRPS 59).

2) *kɔt-u*  
   *i/kǝ=mask’ja-u*  
   *laj nǝ-u, [all-ǝ, ji-ggǝɲɲ-all]*  
   *[i/kǝ=mask’ja]**  
   coat-DEF at= hanger-DEF  
   on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}\(^{\text{22}}\)  
   ‘The coat is on the hanger’ (TRPS 09).

3) *dɔk’ǝ-u*  
   *kǝ=angǝt-u-a*  
   *laj nǝ-u, [all-ǝ, ji-ggǝɲɲ-all]*  
   *[dɔk’ǝ]**  
   necklace-DEF at=neck-POSS.3SG-F  
   on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}\(^{\text{22}}\)  
   ‘The necklace is on her neck’ (TRPS 51).

As shown in examples 1 and 2 above, the ground nouns *t’琬p’eza*, ‘table’, and *mask’ja*, ‘hanger’, begin with the consonants /t’/ and /m/ respectively. In such cases, speakers use the locative prepositions *kǝ*- and *ɨ*- interchangeably, as in 1 and 2. In example 3 above, the ground noun *angǝt,*

\(^{21}\) The preposition *kǝ*- is substituted by *tǝ*- in the Amharic varieties of Wollo (cf. Amsalu Akilulu and Habte Mariam Markos 1973, 126), North Jǝwa (Manz; cf. Hailu Fulas and Fisseha Sisay 1973, 123), and Godǝgǝm (cf. Meyer 2011b, 1182). Save in the Gondar variety, particularly in South Gondar, it occurs as *tǝ*- and sometimes as *hǝ*- (cf. Ambessa Tefera 2013, 260).

\(^{22}\) The phonetic form of it is *[nǝw]*.

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‘neck’, begins with a vowel (i.e. /a/), so speakers do not use the morpheme i- in place of kǝ-.

There is also another locative preposition bǝ-, ‘at’, which has a slight semantic difference from the other locative prepositions. Although it is not usually used in basic locative expressions, it has a locative function. In many instances, it occurs with verbs designating topological relations as in the following examples.

4) a. tembɨr-um bǝ=posta-um laj tǝ-lat’t’if-o-all
> [bǝ=postaw] > [tǝ-lat’t’ifw-all]

stamp-DEF at=post-DEF on PASS-glue.CV3G.M-AUX

‘The stamp is glued on the envelope’ (TRPS 03).

b. kɨrr-um bǝ=fama-um laj tǝ-t’mit’t’im-o-all
> [bǝ=famaw] > [tǝ-t’mit’t’imw-all]

thread-DEF at=candle-DEF on PASS-encircle.CV3G.M-AUX

‘The thread has been encircled on the candle’ (TRPS 04).

In examples 4a and 4b, the verbs talat’t’ef- ‘having stuck’, and tat’mat’t’m- ‘having encircled’, express topological relations: adhesion and encirclement respectively. In such instances, the preposition bǝ- shows that the noun phrases posta, ‘envelope’, and sama, ‘candle’, have the function of locations at which tembɨr, ‘stamp’ (4a), and kɨrr, ‘thread’ (4b), are fixed. However, it can also occur with the copula.

5) t’alla-um bǝ=biṟt’iḱ’o-um wist’ nǝ-um, {all-ǝ}
> [t’allaw] > [bǝ=biṟt’iḱ’ow]

local beer-DEF at=glass-DEF in COP-3G.M, {exist}

‘The local beer is in the glass’ (lit. ‘The local beer is inside the glass’).

In this example, the preposition bǝ- shows that the ground biṟt’iḱ’o serves as a container of t’alla. In such a case, speakers emphasize to the container. The container itself is the location of t’alla.

1.2 Spatial Postpositions

Amharic uses considerable numbers of spatial postpositions to express the static location of the figure. The postpositions encode the general location of the figure, which does not show the specific type of topological features, or relative location of the figure, which indicates specific relational locations in reference to ground. Some spatial postpositions overlap with frames of reference but here they are described as non-angular specifications. Amharic
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spatial postpositions encode (1) general location of a figure, (2) specific topological relations between figure and ground, or (3) a region at which figure is located (see Table 1).

Table 1 Some Amharic spatial postpositions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Stimulating pictures</th>
<th>Semantic conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>laj</em></td>
<td>at, on, top</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22</td>
<td>1) The figure is in contact with the ground horizontally or vertically. 2) The figure sits or stands on the ground but is not covered by it. 3) The figure is anchored or stuck on the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>wist</em></td>
<td>inside</td>
<td>2, 11, 14</td>
<td>The figure is totally or partially covered by the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*wist/<em>if</em></td>
<td>outside</td>
<td>The figure is outside of the container.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>zurija</em></td>
<td>around</td>
<td>15, 54, 67, 71</td>
<td>The figure encircles ground but does not have physical contact with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>sir</em></td>
<td>under</td>
<td>16, 24, 49</td>
<td>The figure is below the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>dar</em></td>
<td>edge</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>The figure is on the periphery of inanimate ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>mabAL</em></td>
<td>centre</td>
<td>19, 60</td>
<td>1) The figure is at the centre of the ground. 2) The figure is between two grounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>taf</em></td>
<td>tip</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>The figure is on the tip of the vertically or horizontally extended ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>rasge</em></td>
<td>on the top of</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>The figure is at the top of the vertically extended or lying headed body ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>anat</em></td>
<td>head, top</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>The figure is at the top of the vertically extended ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ga</em></td>
<td>on the bottom of</td>
<td>The figure is at the bottom of the vertically extended or headed and legged body ground.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>zand</em></td>
<td>at</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>The figure is located in the region of moveable ground or non-place name ground which covers a small land area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>t'igg</em></td>
<td>next to</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>The figure is next to the inanimate ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>at'ag ah</em></td>
<td>nearness</td>
<td>6, 38, 49</td>
<td>The figure is close to the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ak'rabbiya</em></td>
<td>vicinity</td>
<td>The figure is in the vicinity of the ground.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.2.1 Postpositions Designating a General Location

In Amharic, the postposition *laj*, ‘at’, ‘on’, ‘top’, is at the centre of static locational expressions. In the descriptions of seventy-one TRPS, *laj* appears in fifty-three of them. It is a general locative postposition that does not show a specific relational position of the figure with respect to ground. It can be used in contexts when (1) figure is in contact with ground horizontally or vertically, as in 6a and in 6b; (2) figure is anchored or stuck on ground as in 7; (3) figure is part of whole (part of ground) as in 9; and (4) figure sits or stands on ground (see examples 10a and b).

6) a. *mǝs’haf*-u *=madǝrdǝrija*-u *laj* *nǝ-u* {all-ǝ, ji-ggǝɲɲ-all} > [i=*madǝrdǝrijaw]*

   book-DEF  at=shelf-DEF  on  COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}

   ‘The book is on the shelf’ (TRPS 08).

   b. *kot*-u ǝ*=mask’ǝja*-u *laj* *nǝ-u* {all-ǝ, ji-ggǝɲɲ-all} > [tǝ=*mask’ǝjaw]*

   coat-DEF  at=hanger-DEF  on  COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}

   ‘The coat is on the hanger’ (TRPS 09).

Consider examples 6a and 6b above: the figure *mǝs’haf*, ‘book’, in 6a is supported horizontally by *madǝrdǝrija*, ‘shelf’, whereas the figure *kot*, ‘coat’, in 6b is hung at *mask’ǝja*, ‘hanger’. The topological relation between *mǝs’haf* and *madǝrdǝrija* in 6a is horizontal, while the spatial relation between *kot* and *mask’ǝja* in 6b is vertical (hanging position). Although the topological relations between figure and ground in 6a and 6b are not the same, Amharic employs identical postposition *laj* to express both spatial relations. Therefore, we can say that the postposition *laj* does not differentiate horizontal and vertical support in topological relations. In such a case, the specific topological relation can be determined from the knowledge of the observers.

The postposition *laj* can also be used when the figure is fixed on the ground. In this case, there is no space between the figure and the ground. This implies that the figure covers some parts of the ground. Consider the following descriptions of picture 20 (‘balloon on a stick’) and 03 (‘stamp on a letter’) of TRPS.

7) a. *fiɲɲa*-u ǝ*=kǝ/i=bǝttir*-u *laj* *nǝ-u* {all-ǝ, ji-ggǝɲɲ-all} > [fiɲɲaw]

   balloon-DEF  at=stick-DEF  on  COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}

   ‘The balloon is on the stick’ (TRPS 20).
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b. \textit{tembǐr-} \textit{ka}/i = \textit{posta-} \textit{laj} \textit{nə}-\textit{u, [all-ə, ji-ggəŋŋ-all]}
\[> [\textit{ka}/i = \textit{posta}w]\]

\textit{stamp-DEF at=post-DEF on COP-3SG.M, [exist, be.found]}

‘The stamp is on the envelope’\textsuperscript{23} (TRPS 03).

Note that the figure \textit{fiŋna}, ‘balloon’, in picture 20 (‘balloon on stick’) of TRPS is anchored on \textit{battir}, ‘stick’. In picture 03 (‘stamp on letter’) of TRPS, the figure \textit{tembǐr} is securely stuck on \textit{posta}. In the descriptions of both scenes, in examples 7a and 7b, the general spatial postposition \textit{laj} is used to express the locations of the figures \textit{fiŋna} and \textit{tembǐr}. Thus, Amharic does not have postpositions that can contrast spatial relations of (+/-) attachment by cord and (+/-) adhesion. To specify such kinds of spatial relations, positional verbs can be included.

8) a. \textit{fiŋna-} \textit{ka}/i/\textit{bə=battir-} \textit{laj} \textit{ta-asir-o-all}
\[> [\textit{fiŋna}w] > [\textit{tasir}w]\]

\textit{balloon-DEF at=stick-DEF on PASS-tie.CVB-3SG.M-AUX}

‘The balloon is tied on the stick’ (TRPS 20).

b. \textit{tembǐr-} \textit{ka}/i = \textit{posta-} \textit{laj} \textit{ta-lat'tif-o-all}
\[> [\textit{ka}/i = \textit{posta}w] > [\textit{talat'tif}w]\]

\textit{stamp-DEF at=post-DEF on PASS-stick.CVB-3SG.M}

‘The stamp has stuck the envelope’ (TRPS 03).

In these examples, the verbs \textit{tasir-}, ‘having tied’, in 8a and \textit{talat'tif-}, ‘having stuck’, in 8b encode the notions of attachment and adhesion respectively. In addition, the Amharic postposition \textit{laj} can be deployed to indicate the figure is in part–whole relation with the ground and to encode marks on the surface. This shows that the basic locative construction can be used for the part–whole relation. Consider the following examples.

9) \textit{s’ibuʃ-} \textit{ka}/i = \textit{fəmiz-} \textit{laj} \textit{nə}-\textit{u, [all-ə, ji-ggəŋŋ-all]}

\textit{writing-DEF at=shirt-DEF on COP-3SG.M, [exist, be.found]}

‘The writing is on the shirt’ (TRPS 68).

As shown, the figure of 9, \textit{s’ibuʃ}, ‘writing’, is part of the whole ground \textit{fəmiz}, ‘shirt’. The spatial postposition \textit{laj} is used to indicate the \textit{s’ibuʃ} is in part–whole relation with the \textit{fəmiz}. Moreover, \textit{laj} can be employed while
expressing the site of an animate figure in sitting or standing positions as in 10a and 10b.

10) a. \[sǝw-ɨjj-ǝ kǝ/i=t’ara-u \]
\[>\{sǝw-ɨjj-ǝ\} \]
\[\text{man-sgl-DEF at=roof-DEF on COP-3SG.M, [exist, be.found]} \]

‘The man is on the roof’ (TRPS 34).

b. \[dimmat-it- u \]
\[kǝ/i=mint’af-u \]
\[>\{nat\} \]
\[\text{cat-DEF-F at=mat-DEF on COP-3SG.F, [exist, be.found]} \]

‘The cat is on the mat’ (TRPS 40).

Picture 34 (‘man on roof’) of TRPS shows that the figure saw, ‘man’, stands on the t’ara, ‘roof’. On the other hand, picture 40 (‘cat on the mat’) of TRPS reveals that the figure dimmat, ‘cat’, sits on the ground mint’af, ‘mat’. In these different contexts, to represent the location of saw in 10a and dimmat in 10b, the postposition laj is used. In general, the spatial postposition laj does not specify topological relations between figure and ground.

Moreover, the spatial postpositions zǝnd, ‘at’,\(^{24}\) that appears in the Amharic varieties of Wallo, Gondar, and Godjzam, and ga, ‘at’, that occurs in the Addis Ababa and North Sawa varieties, can also be used to express the general location of the figure.\(^{25}\) Amharic can only deploy them in contexts when the ground is moveable or covering a small land area. When we say ‘moveable entity’ as a location of a figure, we refer to its location because the location subsumes the entity. So, using these postpositions in such contexts indicates that more emphasis is given to the ground than to its location. Consider the static locative expressions presented below.

11) a. \[mist-e \]
\[ta/i=betasǝb-otstf-u-a \]
\[zǝnd \]
\[>\{ta/i=betasǝbotstfǝ\} \]
\[>\{nat\} \]
\[\text{wife-POSS.1SG at=family-PL-POSS.3SG.F at COP-3SG.F} \]

‘My wife is at her families’ location and with them’ (introspection).

\(^{24}\) Zelealem Leyew 2007, 459 states that zǝnd is the Gɨʔɨz form.

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b. k’’es-u ka/i=biškirkisitjan-u ga na-u, {all-ə, ji-ggatna-all}

priest-DEF at=church-DEF at COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}

‘The priest is at the site of the church’.

In example 11a, the ground entity (i.e. betasb, ‘family’) is moveable. In 11b, the ground object betskirkisitan, ‘church’, covers a small land area. To represent such entities as locations of mist, ‘wife’, in 11a and k’es, ‘priest’, in 11b, the postpositions zǝnd and ga are used. Such types of expressions, of course, can indicate that figures are located at the site of moveable ground (betasb) or ground objects covering a small land area. For instance, when we say mist is located at betasb, we are referring to the location where betasb is found. The postposition zǝnd in 11a has the meanings of ‘at families’ place and with them’.

1.2.2 Postpositions Representing Specific Topological Relations

Specific topological relations can be expressed by using those spatial postpositions representing the relative location of a figure in reference to ground. These postpositions can also be categorized as nouns. This is because they behave, in other contexts, like other nominals, that is, they can inflect for gender, possession, and definiteness. However, semantically they serve as locatives.26 When they express the basic location of the figure, they do not show inflections; they behave like other spatial adpositions and can be treated as closed-class words. As a result, ‘spatial adpositions’ is the preferred designation here. Spatial postpositions can specify the location of the figure with respect to the ground. Amharic postpositions expressing specific topological relations between figure and ground entities cover the following semantic components. These are (1) horizontality, (2) verticality, (3) containment (enclosure), and (4) distance.

1.2.2.1 Horizontality

The horizontal topological relations that Amharic shows are front–back and central–peripheral relations. The topological relation of the front is present in the spatial postpositions fit, ‘front’, and fit-la-fit,27 ‘in front of’, whereas the back topological relation is found in the terms b̄ala, ‘back’, and ḍʒorba, ‘back’, that compete equally. Note that these terms also have projective

27 This term means ‘face to face’. The body term fit, ‘face’, grammaticalizes into the spatial term ‘front’. 
meanings, that is, they specify the angular location of the figure in reference to the ground entity. Central topological relations can be encoded by using mǝhǝl, ‘centre’; the spatial information of the periphery is depicted by the spatial postpositions dar, ‘edge’, and gǝdǝn > [gonn], ‘side’.

12) a. jǝ-whiba-u gudgǝd ad kǝ=bet-u fit-la-fit nǝ-u
> [jǝwhiba] > [nǝw]
GEN-water-DEF well at=house-DEF in.front.of COP-3SG.M
‘The well of water is in front of the house’.

b. kǝfo-u kǝ=bet-u dǝrba nǝ-u, {ji-ggaɲɲ-all}
> [kǝfow]
hive-DEF at=house-DEF back COP-3SG.M, {be.found}
‘The hive is at the back of the house’.

The spatial term fit-la-fit in 12a specifies the spatial relation of the figure (here jǝ-whiba gudgǝd ad, ‘well of water’) to the location of the ground (here bet, ‘house’), that is, jǝ-whiba gudgǝd ad has horizontal topological relation, specifically front relation, with respect to bet. In 12b, the spatial postposition dǝrba expresses the specific type of horizontal topological relation (i.e. back) between the figure object kǝfo, ‘hive’, and the ground object bet.

1.2.2.2 Verticality

The semantic element of verticality is contrasted with the postpositions laj (‘top’), balaj (‘above’, ‘over’), mǝhǝl (‘midsection’), tatstʃ (‘bottom’), and batatʃtʃ (‘under’, ‘below’). When the figure is located at the top of the ground, the postposition laj can be used; if a figure is located over the ground, the term balaj is preferred. If the figure is located at the middle of the vertically extended ground, the postposition mǝhǝl can be employed; if the location of the figure is below the location of the ground entity, the term batatʃtʃ is used. In addition, positional relations of body parts, such as anat (‘head’), rasge (‘on the top of’), and gǝrge (‘at the foot’, ‘on the bottom of’), sǝr (‘bottom’), and wǝgǝb (‘midsection’), can designate specific topological relations. These postpositions are to be discussed in more detail in the context of frames of reference.
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13) a. *gum*-u *kǝ=tǝra*-u *bǝlaj* *nǝ*-u
> [kǝtǝraraw] > [nǝw]

fog-DEF at=mountain-DEF above COP-3SG.M

‘The fog is above the mountain’ (TRPS 36).

b. *dimmat*-it-u *kǝ=tǝp’eza*-u *sɨr* *nǝ*-at
> [kǝtǝp’ezaaw] > [nǝt]

cat-F-DEF at=table-DEF bottom COP-3SG.F

‘The cat is under the table’ (TRPS 31).

In these examples, the spatial relation between the figures and the grounds is vertical. In 13a, *gum*, ‘fog’ (i.e. the figure), is located above the location of *tǝra*, ‘mountain’ (i.e. the ground). This specific topological relation is represented by the term *bǝlaj*. In 13b, the spatial postposition *sɨr* shows that *dimmat* (i.e. the figure) is located below *tǝp’eza*, that is, the ground object.

1.2.2.3 Containment (Enclosure)

The spatial relation of containment is expressed by the postposition *wɨst’, ‘in’, when the ground object occludes the visibility of the figure. This postposition can be deployed in contexts when a figure is located at the interior portion of bounded ground, thereby the figure is enclosed. This means that the postposition *wɨst’ refers to situations when a figure is partially or wholly enclosed by the bounded ground. It represents an enclosure conformation and a volume conformation. Hence, it encodes the notions of ‘enclosure’ and ‘containment’.

14) a. *asǝ*-u *kǝ/i=*mɨntʃǝt*-u *wist’* *nǝ*-u
> [asaw] > [nǝw]

fish-DEF at=pot-DEF in COP-3SG.M

‘The fish is in the pot’ (TRPS 32).

b. *bet*-u *kǝ=at’ir*-u *wist’* *nǝ*-u
> [kat’iru] > [nǝw]

house-DEF at=fence-DEF in COP-3SG.M

‘The house is in the fence’ (TRPS 60).

In example 14a, *asǝ*, ‘fish’, is located in *mɨntʃǝt*, ‘pot’, that is, a bounded ground object. Here, the ground (i.e. *mɨntʃǝt*) serves as a container of the
figure (i.e. asa). In addition, mintfat occludes the visibility of asa. The postposition wisit’ depicts the notion of containment with occlusion. In 14b, bet (the figure entity) is encircled by at’ir, ‘fence’ (i.e. the ground entity). In this scene, the ground may partially hide the figure from view. Here, the spatial postposition wisit’ does not convey the semantic notion of containment. Instead, it expresses the semantic notion of encirclement with occlusion. Therefore, the postposition wisit’ is associated with occlusion.

In situations when the figure is located surrounding the ground object without physical contact, the postposition zurija, ‘around’, is used, as in 15 below.

15) at’ir-u be=bet-u zurija ne-u, {ji-ggany-all}
      fence-DEF at=house-DEF around COP-3SG.M, {be.found}

‘The fence is around the house’ (TRPS 15).

Picture 15 (‘fence around the house’) of TRPS shows that the figure at’ir is located around the ground bet and the figure does not make contact with the ground. The postposition zurija pays attention to this kind of topological relation.

Moreover, the spatial postposition wisisf’, ‘out’, expresses the situation in which the figure is located at an exterior portion of bounded ground without any contact.

1.2.2.4 Distance

Amharic has other types of spatial postpositions which can specify spatial proximity between figure and ground when they are separated in space. They represent a relative position of a figure in relation to a ground. For example, when a figure is proximal to ground at a different level of proximity, the postpositions like akkababi (‘surrounding area’), gidim (‘near’), ak’ivrabiya (‘vicinity’), at’oggb (‘nearness’), and t’igg (‘next to’) are used; when it is distal to ground, the postpositions such as mado (‘across’, ‘the other side’), and b’aggagur (‘across’, ‘beyond’) are deployed. The spatial postpositions mado and b’aggagur require a boundary between the figure and the ground. Notice that these postpositions designate gradable distance between the figure and the ground.28

28 Out of the total fifteen informants, five of them were asked to locate the postpositions denoting spatial proximity. Among these five informants, one of them locates the postposition gidim in place of akkababi.
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Assume that the site A is the ground’s location and the sites B through H, which have a different level of spatial proximity to the ground, are possible locations of the figure. When the figure is at A, the postposition *laj* can be used; if it is at the site B, the term *t’igg* is employed. If the figure is in C, *at’ogob*; in D, *gidm*; in E, *ak’irabbija*; in F, *akkababi*; in G, *mado*; and, in H, *baʃʃaggor* can be deployed in locative statements. These postpositions can also be followed by the generic postposition *laj* (see the example in 16 below). However, the general locative postposition is optional.

16) a. zaf- *kə=i-betəkısɨtjɨn-* u t’igg *(laj)* na- *jɨ-gɡəɲ-ɟɬl] tree-DEF at=church-DEF next.to at COP-3SG.M, [exist, be.found]

‘The tree is next to the church’ (TRPS 49).

b. wusfa- *jɨ-mdəJR-jɨ- jɨ-gɡəb *(laj)* na- *nəw*
   > [wuʃʃaw] > [kəmadərjəw] > [nəw]
dog-DEF at=doghouse-POSS3SG.M beside at COP-3SG.M

‘The dog is beside the doghouse’ (TRPS 06).

In example 16a, the figure *zaf*, ‘tree’, is located on the very close range of the ground entity *betəkısɨtjɨn*. To specify this spatial proximity, the postposition *t’igg* is employed. Similarly, *wusfa*, ‘dog’ (i.e. the figure), in 16b is located near the doghouse (i.e. the ground). To refer to such spatial proximity, *at’ogob* is used. Thus, such kinds of postpositions can specify the position of the figure with respect to the ground.

The specific locative postpositions can be accompanied by the general locative postposition *laj*, though its occurrence is optional. When it occurs, the ground is expressed with a complex adpositional phrase made up of preposition, ground noun, specific and general locative postpositions. The syntactic relation between the constituents, particularly adpositions, is not horizontal. Consider 17a below, which is derived as follows. The specific locative postposition *dar* merges with the ground noun *isatu*, ‘the fire’, to

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Fig. 1 Amharic postpositions denoting spatial proximity.
form the simple postpositional phrase *isatu dar*, ‘edge of the fire’; the locative preposition *kə* merges with this postpositional phrase to form the complex adpositional phrase *kosatu dar*, ‘at the edge of the fire’; the general locative postposition *laj* merges with this adpositional phrase to form the more complex adpositional phrase *kosatu dar laj*, ‘on the end of edge of the fire’. This demonstrates, in Amharic, that the specific locative postpositions are immediate constituents of the adpositional phrase designating the specific location of the figure. This suggests that they are most relevant to the discussion of a specific location of the figure.

17) a. *lɨdʒ-u kə=ɨsat-u dar (laj) nə-u*  
> [kosatu] > [nəw]

child-DEF at=fire-DEF edge at COP-3SG.M

“The child is on the end of edge of the fire’s location”29 (TRPS 38).

b. *mənʃ-u kə=awdimma-u məhal (laj) nə-u*  
> [kawdimmaw] > [nəw]

pitchfork-DEF at=threshing.floor-DEF centre at COP-3SG.M

‘The pitchfork is right at the centre of the threshing floor’.

c. *kəzərə-u kə=alga-u girge (laj) nə-u*  
> [kəzəraw] > [kalgaw] > [nəw]

cane-DEF at=bed-DEF bottom at COP-3SG.M

‘The cane is right at the bottom of the bed’.

Note that *dar* in 17a represents specific topological relation, that is, the figure (here *lɨdʒ*, ‘child’) is located at the edge of the location of ground (here *ɨsat*, ‘fire’). In the expression, speakers emphasize *ɨsat* which subsumes its location. They construe the space next to *ɨsat* as the end point of its location. Thus, *lɨdʒ* and *ɨsat* have horizontal topological relations. That is why they deploy the postposition *dar* to express the specific location of *lɨdʒ*. In example 17b, the spatial postposition *məhal* encodes the specific location of the figure. It shows that the figure (mənʃ, ‘pitchfork’) is located at the centre of the ground (awdimma, ‘threshing floor’). Thus, when the figure is located at the centre of an encircled space, the spatial relation can be specified with the postposition *məhal*. Example 17c shows a specific type of vertical spatial relation between *kəzərə*, ‘cane’ (i.e. the figure), and *alga*, ‘bed’ (i.e. the ground). In Amharic, the

29 Lit. ‘The child is on the edge of the fire’.
position of alga is understood through the human body because its function is related to the human being. The part of alga where the upper body parts are laid is construed as head, while the part of it where lower body parts are laid is conceived as a leg. Therefore, the bed is construed as a vertically extended object. As seen in the example 17c above, kǝzǝra is located on the lower part of the bed. To express the specific location of the cane, the term girge, ‘at the foot of (bed)’, is used.

1.3 Combinations of Spatial Adpositions in Basic Locative Constructions

As discussed above, Amharic uses spatial adpositions (prepositions and postpositions) in basic locative constructions. The prepositions designate a general location of a figure while the postpositions can render the figure’s general or specific location, spatial proximity, and region. These adpositions may not be deployed independently. Instead, they are constructed in combinations. As locative prepositions do not specify the location of the figure with respect to ground, in most cases, they can co-occur with spatial postpositions. For example, scenes involving ‘cup on the table’ (picture 01 of TRPS) and ‘potato on the plate’ (picture 19 of TRPS) can be described as follows.

18) a. sɨnɨ- kａ/ｉ=т’ǝrǝp’ǝza-u  laj  nǝ-u
   > [sɨnɨw]  > [kǝ/ɨ=т’ǝrǝp’ǝzw]  > [nǝw]
   porcelain.cup-DEF at=table-DEF on COP-3SG.M
   ‘The porcelain cup is on the table’ (TRPS 01).

   b. dɨnnɨ tʃ ʃ - kǝ/ɨ=sabin-u  laj  nǝ-u, {all-ǝ, ji-ɡɡax-ǝll}
   potato-DEF at=plate-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}
   ‘The potato is on the plate’ (TRPS 19).

As can be observed in examples 18a and 18b above, the basic location is constructed by using the general locative prepositions kǝ- or i- with the generic spatial postposition laj. When we see their syntactic relation in the adpositional phrase, firstly, the prepositions kǝ- or i- merge with the ground nouns т’ǝrǝp’ǝza and sabin, ‘plate’, to form the prepositional phrases kǝ/ɨ=т’ǝrǝp’ǝza-u, ‘at the table’, and kǝ/ɨ=sabin, ‘at the plate’, respectively. Then, the postposition laj merges with these prepositional phrases to form the complex adpositional phrases kǝ/ɨ=т’ǝrǝp’ǝza-u laj, ‘at the table’, as in 18a and kǝ/ɨ=sabin laj, ‘on the plate’, as in 18b. This implies, in syntactic structure, that the prepositions are more proximal than the postposition to the ground. In spite of syn-

30 Anbessa Teferra and Hudson 2007, 80–81.
tactic proximity, the prepositions kǝ- and ɨ- are less relevant than the generic postposition laj semantically. The prepositions may be omitted and their omission does not cause semantic differences, as in the examples in 19 given below, but, if the postpositions are reduced in basic locative constructions, the statement cannot be felicitous. For instance, the above expressions (i.e. 18a and 18b) can be uttered as 19a and 19b below respectively.

19) a. smi-u  
  t’orap’eza-u laj nǝ-u, {all-ǝ, ji-ggəɲɲ-all}  
  > [smi 자리]  
  > [t’orap’eza 자리]

  porcelain.cup-DEF table-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}

  ‘The porcelain cup is on the table’.

  b. dınıstʃ-u  
  sabın-u  
  laj nǝ-u, {all-ǝ, ji-ggəɲɲ-all}  

  potato-DEF plate-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}

  ‘The potato is on the plate’.

As can be shown in examples 19a and 19b above, the prepositions kǝ- and its variant ɨ- are omitted and became zero morphemes but they do not cause a semantic difference in the expressions. Similar to the prepositions, the postposition laj can be reduced to zero morph in situations when the ground is a location (e.g. home, market, church, school) which is conceived as covering a small land area. In this case, site can be expressed with the preposition (see 20b) or interpreted from the context (i.e. from the nature of the ground; see 20c). For example, speaker X asks speaker Y about where he is at the time of utterance to which he may respond by saying,

20) a. X: jat  
  nǝ-h?

  where COP-2SG.M

  ‘Where are you?’ (introspection).

  b. Y: kǝ/i=bet  
  nǝ-ɲɲ

  at=house COP-1SG

  ‘I am at home’ (introspection).

  c. bet  
  (nǝ-ɲɲ)

  house COP-1SG

  ‘I am at home’ (introspection).

31 Lit. ‘I am home’.

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We can see that the prepositions kǝ- or ɨ-, as in 20b, can be used in the absence of the spatial postposition laj. In example 20c, there is no preposition or postposition to refer to the ground which has a function of location. However, the response is interpreted as location. The interrogative pronoun jat, ‘where’, in 20a entails that the response bet (naɲɲ), ‘I am home’, in 20c is a locational response and can be interpreted as ‘the figure is at home’.

Conclusion

In basic locative constructions, Amharic uses spatial adpositions (prepositions and postpositions in combinations) with a copula or a locative verb. The prepositions kǝ- and its free variant ɨ-, ‘at’, render the notion of the general location of the figure. The postpositions designate different types of topological relations. They can encode (1) general location of a figure (e.g. the postposition laj, ‘on’), (2) relational positions of a figure in reference to ground (e.g. dar, ‘edge’, and moḥal, ‘centre’), (3) relative spatial proximity (e.g. ak’rabbija, ‘vicinity’, and at’ǝgǝb, ‘nearness’), and (4) region (e.g. wǝst, ‘in’, and ga, ‘at’). The verbs used in Amharic basic locative constructions are the copulas na-, ‘be’, and all-, ‘exist’, with their suppletive form nabbǝr-, ‘be.PST’, ‘exist.PST’, and the locative verb ji-t-gaɲɲ-all > [ji-ggaɲɲ-all], ‘be found’. The copulas and the locative verb nearly equally compete for locative constructions. This shows that Amharic does not appear to fit clearly into Ameka and Levinson’s typology of locative predicates.32

Abbreviations

1 = first person  
2 = second person  
3 = third person  
AUX = auxiliary  
COP = copula  
CVB = converb  
DEF = definite  
F = feminine  
M = masculine  
PASS = passive  
PL = plural  
POSS = possessive  
SG = singular  
SGL = singulative

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References


The Semantics of Locative Adpositions in Amharic


Summary

This paper intends to describe the semantics of locative adpositions in Amharic, a Semitic language spoken in Ethiopia. The analysis is based on elicited data that were collected by using Bowerman and Pederson’s (1992) topological relations picture series. The study shows that Amharic locative adpositions can convey specific and generic topological relations between the figure and ground entities. The specific locatives show a specific type of topological relations (for instance, verticality as in tatʃʃ, ‘below’, ‘under’; horizontality as in fit, ‘front’; containment as in wɨst, ‘in’) between the figure and ground entities, but not the generic locatives. Aside from which, I argue that Amharic does not fit into Ameka and Levinson’s (2007) typology of locative predicates and constitutes a type of its own because it uses two copulas and a locative verb.