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GASHAW ARUTIE ASAYE, Bahir Dar University

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The Semantics of Locative Adpositions in Amharic

GASHAW ARUTIE ASAYE, Bahir Dar University

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.¹ According to the Population Census Commission, Ethiopian people speak Amharic as a first language.² It is the second most populous Semitic language after Arabic.³ It was the only language of education in Ethiopian primary schools and the most prestigious and dominant language in Ethiopia until 1991.⁴ It serves as a *de facto* lingua franca in major cities and towns of the country,⁵ 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 Abəba,⁶ native Amharic speakers live in the core Amhara areas such as Gondər, Godzdzam, (North) fəwa and Wəlo.⁷

In this article, I identify and examine the linguistic forms employed in basic locative constructions in the sense of Levinson and Wilkins' topological relations.⁸ 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?').⁹

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

¹ Cf. Gragg and Hoberman 2012, 149; Girma A. Demeke 2001, 61; Hetzron 1972, 119.

² 21,631,370, cf. Population Census Commission 2008, 91.

³ Girma Awgichew Demeke 2009, 2; Hudson 1997, 457.

⁴ Meyer 2006, 129.

⁵ Meyer 2011a, 1213; Meyer 2006, 129; Hudson 1997, 457.

⁶ In Addis Abəba, the capital city of Ethiopia, those who were born and have grown there are monolingual speakers of Amharic.

⁷ Meyer 2011a, 1213; Meyer 2006, 118; Hudson 1997, 457.

⁸ Levinson and Wilkins 2006a; 2006b.

⁹ Levinson and Wilkins 2006a, 514; 2006b, 15.

(henceforth TRPS).¹⁰ 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 predicates, case inflections, locative verbs) when expressing basic location.¹¹ 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).¹² 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, Tiriyo) 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, Zapoteco, 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.¹³

¹⁰ Bowerman and Pederson 1992.

¹¹ Levinson and Wilkins 2006b, 16.

¹² Ameka and Levinson 2007, 863–864.

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 *nə-*, ‘be’, *all-*, ‘exist’,¹⁷ and *nəbbər-*, ‘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-gəjjən-all* > [*ji-ggəjjən-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 *təgəjjənə/jiggəjjənall*, ‘exist’, can be used in basic locative constructions, with which I agree.

¹⁵ Bayə Yimam 2016–2017, 93; Anbessa Teferra and Hudson 2007, 46–47; Leslau 1995, 597–616.

¹⁶ Baker and Kramer 2014, 144; Hetzron 1970, 308–315.

¹⁷ It is an existential copula but it can also be used in locational expressions.

¹⁸ Cf. Meyer 2011b, 1196–1197.

¹⁹ Bayə Yimam 2016–2017, 135.

²⁰ Ameka and Levinson 2007, 863–864.

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 *kə-* and *i-*, ‘at’.²¹ 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 *kə-* or *i-* interchangeably in situations where the noun of the ground begins with a consonant. When the ground noun begins with a vowel, they use *kə-*. For illustration, consider utterances 1, 2, and 3.

- 1) *irsas-u* *i/kə=t'əɾəp'eza-u* *laj* *nə-u*,²² {*all-ə, ji-ggəɲɲ-all*}
 > [*i/kə=t'əɾəp'ezaw*]
- pencil-DEF at=table-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}
- ‘The pencil is on the table’ (TRPS 59).
- 2) *kot-u* *i/kə=məsk'əja-u* *laj* *nə-u*, {*all-ə, ji-ggəɲɲ-all*}
 > [*i/kə=məsk'əjaw*]
- coat-DEF at= hanger-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}
- ‘The coat is on the hanger’ (TRPS 09).
- 3) *dok'a-u* *kə=angət-u-a* *laj* *nə-u*, {*all-ə, ji-ggəɲɲ-all*}
 > [*dok'aw*] > [*kəɲgət^wa*]
- necklace-DEF at=neck-POSS.3SG-F on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}
- ‘The necklace is on her neck’ (TRPS 51).

As shown in examples 1 and 2 above, the ground nouns *t'əɾəp'eza*, ‘table’, and *məsk'əja*, ‘hanger’, begin with the consonants /t'/and /m/ respectively. In such cases, speakers use the locative prepositions *kə-* and *i-* interchangeably, as in 1 and 2. In example 3 above, the ground noun *angət*,

²¹ The preposition *kə-* is substituted by *tə-* in the Amharic varieties of Wəllo (cf. Amsalu Aklilu and Habte Mariam Markos 1973, 126), North Səwa (Mənz; cf. Hailu Fulass and Fisseha Sisay 1973, 123), and Godzədzam (cf. Meyer 2011b, 1182). Save in the Gondər variety, particularly in South Gondər, it occurs as *tə-* and sometimes as *hə-* (cf. Anbessa Tefera 2013, 260).

²² The phonetic form of it is [*nəw*].

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

There is also another locative preposition *bə*-, ‘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. *tembir-u* *bə=posta-u* *laj tə-lət't'if-o-all*
 > [*bə=postaw*] > [*tə-lət't'if^wall*]
 stamp-DEF at=post- DEF on PASS-gluе.CVB-3SG.M-AUX

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

- b. *kirr-u* *bə=fama-u* *laj tə-t'əmit't'im-o-all*
 > [*bə=famaw*] > [*tə-t'əmit't'im^wall*]
 thread-DEF at=candle-DEF on PASS-encircle.CVB-3SG.M-AUX

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

In examples 4a and 4b, the verbs *tə-lət't'if-*, ‘having stuck’, and *tə-t'əmit't'əm-*, ‘having encircled’, express topological relations: adhesion and encirclement respectively. In such instances, the preposition *bə*- shows that the noun phrases *posta*, ‘envelope’, and *fama*, ‘candle’, have the function of locations at which *tembir*, ‘stamp’ (4a), and *kirr*, ‘thread’ (4b), are fixed. However, it can also occur with the copula.

- 5) *t'alla-u* *bə=birtf'ik'o-u* *wist' nə-u, {all-ə}*
 > [*t'allaw*] > [*bə=birtf'ik'ow*]
 local beer-DEF at=glass-DEF in COP-3SG.M, {exist}

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

In this example, the preposition *bə*- shows that the ground *birtf'ik'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 positions in reference to ground. Some spatial postpositions overlap with frames of reference but here they are described as non-angular specifications. Amharic

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

Form	Gloss	Stimulating pictures	Semantic conditions
<i>laj</i>	at, on, top	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22,	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.
<i>wist'</i>	inside	2, 11, 14,	The figure is totally or partially covered by the ground.
<i>witʹtʹ</i>	outside		The figure is outside of the container.
<i>zurija</i>	around	15, 54, 67, 71	The figure encircles ground but does not have physical contact with it.
<i>sir</i>	under	16, 24, 49	The figure is below the ground.
<i>dar</i>	edge	38	The figure is on the periphery of inanimate ground.
<i>məhal</i>	centre	19, 60	1) The figure is at the centre of the ground. 2) The figure is between two grounds.
<i>tʹaf</i>	tip	20	The figure is on the tip of the vertically or horizontally extended ground.
<i>rasge</i>	on the top of	65	The figure is at the top of the vertically extended or lying headed body ground.
<i>anat</i>	head, top	65	The figure is at the top of the vertically extended ground.
<i>gʹrge</i>	on the bottom of		The figure is at the bottom of the vertically extended or headed and legged body ground.
<i>ga</i> <i>zənd</i>	at	6	The figure is located in the region of moveable ground or non-place name ground which covers a small land area.
<i>tʹigg</i>	next to	6	The figure is next to the inanimate ground.
<i>atʹəg əb</i>	nearness	6, 38, 49	The figure is close to the ground.
<i>akʹrabbija</i>	vicinity		The figure is in the vicinity of the ground.

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. *məs'haf-u i=mədərdərija-u laj nə-u, {all-ə, jǝ-ggəjjǝ-all}*
> [*i=mədərdərijaw*]

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

‘The book is on the shelf’ (TRPS 08).

- b. *kot-u kə=məsk'əja -u laj nə-u, {all-ə, jǝ-ggəjjǝ-all}*
> [*tə=məsk'əja w*]

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 *məs'haf*, ‘book’, in 6a is supported horizontally by *mədərdərija*, ‘shelf’, whereas the figure *kot*, ‘coat’, in 6b is hung at *məsk'əja*, ‘hanger’. The topological relation between *məs'haf* and *mədərdərija* in 6a is horizontal, while the spatial relation between *kot* and *məsk'əja* 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. *fiŋŋa-u kə/i=bəttir-u laj nə-u, {all-ə, jǝ-ggəjjǝ-all}*
> [*fiŋŋaw*]

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

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

- b. *tembīr-u kə/i=posta-u laj nə-u*, {*all-ə, ji-ggəjjə-all*}
 > [*kə/i=postaw*]
 stamp-DEF at=post-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}
 ‘The stamp is on the envelope’²³ (TRPS 03).

Note that the figure *fijjina*, ‘balloon’, in picture 20 (‘balloon on stick’) of TRPS is anchored on *bəttir*, ‘stick’. In picture 03 (‘stamp on letter’) of TRPS, the figure *tembīr* is securely stuck on *posta*. In the descriptions of both scenes, in examples 7a and 7b, the general spatial postposition *laj* is used to express the locations of the figures *fijjina* and *tembīr*. 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. *fijjina-u kə/i/bə=bəttir-u laj tə-asir-o-all*
 > [*fijjinaʷ*] > [*tasir^wall*]
 balloon-DEF at=stick-DEF on PASS-tie.CVB-3SG.M-AUX
 ‘The balloon is tied on the stick’ (TRPS 20).

- b. *tembīr-u kə/i=posta-u laj tə-lət’t’if-o-all*
 > [*kə/i=postaw*] > [*tələt’t’if^wall*]
 stamp-DEF at=post-DEF on PASS-stick.CVB-3SG.M
 ‘The stamp has stuck the envelope’ (TRPS 03).

In these examples, the verbs *tasir-*, ‘having tied’, in 8a and *tələt’t’if-*, ‘having stuck’, in 8b encode the notions of attachment and adhesion respectively. In addition, the Amharic postposition *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) *s’ibuf-u kə/i=səmis-u laj nə-u*, {*all-ə, ji-ggəjjə-all*}
 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, *s’ibuf*, ‘writing’, is part of the whole ground *səmis*, ‘shirt’. The spatial postposition *laj* is used to indicate the *s’ibuf* is in part–whole relation with the *səmis*. Moreover, *laj* can be employed while

²³ Lit. ‘The stamp is on the post’.

expressing the site of an animate figure in sitting or standing positions as in 10a and 10b.

- 10) a. *səw-ijjə-u* *kə/i=t'ara-u* *laj* *nə-u*, {*all-ə*, *ji-ggəjjn-all*}
 > [*səw-ijjə-w*]
 man-sgl-DEF at=roof-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}
 ‘The man is on the roof’ (TRPS 34).

- b. *dimmət-it-u* *kə/i=mint'af-u* *laj* *nə-at*, {*all-ət.tɪf*, *t-ggəjjn-all-ət.tɪf*}
 > [*nat*]
 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 *səw*, ‘man’, stands on the *t'ara*, ‘roof’. On the other hand, picture 40 (‘cat on the mat’) of TRPS reveals that the figure *dimmət*, ‘cat’, sits on the ground *mint'af*, ‘mat’. In these different contexts, to represent the location of *səw* in 10a and *dimmət* 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 *zənd*, ‘at’,²⁴ that appears in the Amharic varieties of Wəllō, Gondər, and Godzdzam, and *ga*, ‘at’, that occurs in the Addis Abəba and North fəwa 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* *tə/i=betəsəb-ot.tɪf-u-a* *zənd* *nə-at*
 > [*tə/i=betəsəbot.tɪfwa*] > [*nat*]
 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 *zənd* is the Gʷiz form.

²⁵ Cf. Zelealem Leyew 2007, 459.

- b. *k'es-u* *kə/i=betəkirsitjan-u* *ga* *nə-u*, {*all-ə*, *ji-ggəjjə-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. *betəsəb*, 'family') is moveable. In 11b, the ground object *betəkirsitjan*, '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 *zənd* and *ga* are used. Such types of expressions, of course, can indicate that figures are located at the site of moveable ground (*betəsəb*) or ground objects covering a small land area. For instance, when we say *mist* is located at *betəsəb*, we are referring to the location where *betəsəb* is found. The postposition *zənd* 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-lə-fit*,²⁷ 'in front of', whereas the back topological relation is found in the terms *h^wala*, 'back', and *dʒərba*, 'back', that compete equally. Note that these terms also have projective

²⁶ Baye Yimam 2017, 21.

²⁷ This term means 'face to face'. The body term *fit*, 'face', grammaticalizes into the spatial term 'front'.

- 13) a. *gum-u* *kə=tərara-u* *bəlalj* *nə-u*
 > [*kətəraraɿw*] > [*nəw*]
 fog-DEF at=mountain-DEF above COP-3SG.M
 ‘The fog is above the mountain’ (TRPS 36).

- b. *dimmət-it-u* *kə=t’ərəp’əza-u* *sir* *nə-at*
 > [*kət’ərəp’əzaɿw*] > [*nat*]
 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 *tərara*, ‘mountain’ (i.e. the ground). This specific topological relation is represented by the term *bəlalj*. In 13b, the spatial postposition *sir* shows that *dimmət* (i.e. the figure) is located below *t’ərəp’əza*, that is, the ground object.

1.2.2.3 Containment (Enclosure)

The spatial relation of containment is expressed by the postposition *wist’*, ‘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 *wist’* 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. *asa-u* *kə/i=mint.fət-u* *wist’* *nə-u*
 > [*asaw*] > [*nəw*]
 fish-DEF at=pot-DEF in COP-3SG.M
 ‘The fish is in the pot’ (TRPS 32).

- b. *bet-u* *kə=at’ir-u* *wist’* *nə-u*
 > [*kat’iru*] > [*nəw*]
 house-DEF at=fence-DEF in COP-3SG.M
 ‘The house is in the fence’ (TRPS 60).

In example 14a, *asa*, ‘fish’, is located in *mint.fət*, ‘pot’, that is, a bounded ground object. Here, the ground (i.e. *mint.fət*) serves as a container of the

figure (i.e. *asa*). In addition, *mintʃət* occludes the visibility of *asa*. The postposition *wistʹ* depicts the notion of containment with occlusion. In 14b, *bet* (the figure entity) is encircled by *atʹir*, ‘fence’ (i.e. the ground entity). In this scene, the ground may partially hide the figure from view. Here, the spatial postposition *wistʹ* does not convey the semantic notion of containment. Instead, it expresses the semantic notion of encirclement with occlusion. Therefore, the postposition *wistʹ* 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) *atʹir-u* *bə=bet-u* *zurija* *nə-u, {jɨ-ggəjɨn-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 *atʹir* 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 *witʃʹ*, ‘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’), *akʹirabbija* (‘vicinity’), *atʹəgəb* (‘nearness’), and *tʹigg* (‘next to’) are used; when it is distal to ground, the postpositions such as *mado* (‘across’, ‘the other side’), and *bəʃaggər* (‘across’, ‘beyond’) are deployed. The spatial postpositions *mado* and *bəʃaggər* 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*.

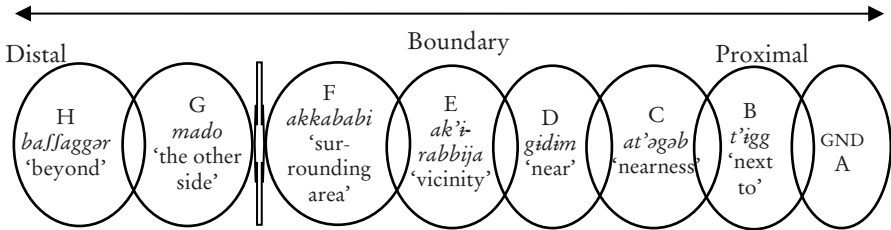


Fig. 1 Amharic postpositions denoting spatial proximity.

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’əgəb*; in D, *gidim*; in E, *ak’irabbija*; in F, *akkebabī*; in G, *mado*; and, in H, *baffaggər* 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-u kə/i=betəkirsitjan-u t’igg (laj) nə-u, {all-ə, ji-ggəŋŋ-all}*
 tree-DEF at=church-DEF next.to at COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}

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

b. *wuffsa-u kə=madərija-u at’əgəb (laj) nə-u*
 > [wuffsaʷ] > [kəmadərijaʷ] > [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 *betəkirsitjan*. To specify this spatial proximity, the postposition *t’igg* is employed. Similarly, *wuffsa*, ‘dog’ (i.e. the figure), in 16b is located near the doghouse (i.e. the ground). To refer to such spatial proximity, *at’əgəb* 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

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 *kəsatu dar*, ‘at the edge of the fire’; the general locative postposition *laj* merges with this adpositional phrase to form the more complex adpositional phrase *kəsatu 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. *lidz-u* *kə=isat-u* *dar (laj)* *nə-u*
 > [*kəsatu*] > [*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. *mənɸ-u* *kə=awdiɸma-u* *məhal (laj)* *nə-u*
 > [*kawdiɸmaɸw*] > [*nəw*]
 pitchfork-DEF at=threshing.floor-DEF centre at COP-3SG.M

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

c. *kəzəra-u* *kə=alga-u* *girge (laj)* *nə-u*
 > [*kəzəraɸw*] > [*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 *lidz*, ‘child’) is located at the edge of the location of ground (here *isat*, ‘fire’). In the expression, speakers emphasize to *isat* which subsumes its location. They construe the space next to *isat* as the end point of its location. Thus, *lidz* and *isat* have horizontal topological relations. That is why they deploy the postposition *dar* to express the specific location of *lidz*. In example 17b, the spatial postposition *məhal* encodes the specific location of the figure. It shows that the figure (*mənɸ*, ‘pitchfork’) is located at the centre of the ground (*awdiɸma*, ‘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 *kəzəra*, ‘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, *kəzəra* 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.³⁰ 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. *ṣini-u* *kə/i=t’ərəp’əza-u* *laj* *nə-u*
 > [*ṣiniw*] > [*kə/i=t’ərəp’əzaw*] > [*nəw*]
 porcelain.cup-DEF at=table- DEF on COP-3SG.M

‘The porcelain cup is on the table’ (TRPS 01).

b. *dinnit/ftf-u* *kə/i=sahin-u* *laj* *nə-u*, {*all-ə*, *jǝ-ggəjjǝ-all*}
 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 *kə-* or *i-* with the generic spatial postposition *laj*. When we see their syntactic relation in the adpositional phrase, firstly, the prepositions *kə-* or *i-* merge with the ground nouns *t’ərəp’əza* and *sahin*, ‘plate’, to form the prepositional phrases *kə/i=t’ərəp’əza-u*, ‘at the table’, and *kə/i=sahin*, ‘at the plate’, respectively. Then, the postposition *laj* merges with these prepositional phrases to form the complex adpositional phrases *kə/i=t’ərəp’əza-u laj*, ‘at the table’, as in 18a and *kə/i=sahin 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 *kə-* and *i-* 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. *sini-u* *t'ərap'əza-u* *laj* *nə-u*, {*all-ə*, *ji-ggəjjj-*all**}
 > [*siniw*] > [*t'ərap'əzaw*]
 porcelain.cup-DEF table-DEF on COP-3SG.M, {exist, be.found}
 'The porcelain cup is on the table'.
- b. *dinnitf-u* *sahin-u* *laj* *nə-u*, {*all-ə*, *ji-ggəjjj-*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 *kə-* and its variant *i-* 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: *jət* *nə-h?*
 where COP-2SG.M
 'Where are you?' (introspection).
- b. Y: *kə/i=bet* *nə-*jjj**
 at=house COP-1SG
 'I am at home' (introspection).
- c. *bet* (*nə-*jjj**)
 house COP-1SG
 'I am at home'³¹ (introspection).

³¹ Lit. 'I am home'.

We can see that the prepositions *kə-* or *i-*, 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 *jət*, ‘where’, in 20a entails that the response *bet* (*nəገገ*), ‘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 *kə-* and its free variant *i-*, ‘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 *məhal*, ‘centre’), (3) relative spatial proximity (e.g. *ak’irabbija*, ‘vicinity’, and *at’əgəb*, ‘nearness’), and (4) region (e.g. *wist*, ‘in’, and *ga*, ‘at’). The verbs used in Amharic basic locative constructions are the copulas *nə-*, ‘be’, and *all-*, ‘exist’, with their suppletive form *nəbbər-*, ‘be.PST’, ‘exist.PST’, and the locative verb *jī-t-gəገገ-all* > [*jī-ggəገገ-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

³² Ameka and Levinson 2007.

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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 *tat.tif*, ‘below’, ‘under’; horizontality as in *fit*, ‘front’; containment as in *wist*, ‘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.