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Grammaticalization of *qəl* ‘gourd’ in Amharic¹

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Abstract:

The Amharic word *qəl* ‘gourd’ represents a rare case where a plant term serves as the source of a grammaticalization chain. The development occurred in two stages, first metaphoric change, then grammaticalization proper: gourd > skull/head > Intensive (never Plain) Reflexive (‘he himself, etc.’). This process was entangled with the grammatical evolution of two other words, *ras* and *gəll*. *Ras*, which is the basic unmarked term for ‘head’, as such underwent the basic unmarked grammaticalization into a Plain Reflexive (and only secondarily into an Intensive Reflexive). The other word, *gəll* ‘separate, individual’, phonetically quite similar to *qəl* but with no etymological connection to ‘head’, grammaticalized directly to the meaning ‘one’s own, by oneself’, thence secondarily to an Intensive Reflexive (but never a Plain Reflexive). Thus two near-synonyms (*qəl*, *ras* ‘head’) underwent two parallel grammaticalizations, but yielding different results: *qəl*, unlike *ras*, was never a Plain Reflexive. Why? The distinctive semantic evolution of *qəl*, I suggest, was partly driven by its phonetic similarity to the historically unrelated *gəll*, which also was never a Plain Reflexive. The phonetic similarity helped to foster a semantic attraction between the two grammaticalizing morphemes.

Keywords: Amharic, grammaticalization, intensive reflexives, attraction of morphemes

The Amharic lexical item *qəl* (Kane 1990, I: 673–674) basically means ‘gourd, calabash’. As this article will be dealing with the grammaticalization development undergone by *qəl* within Amharic, I should say at the outset that it is only tangentially concerned with the word’s pre-Amharic etymology and development. A word cognate to *qəl* and

1 Oral versions of this paper were presented at the 23rd Afrikanistentag in Hamburg and at the 20th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (ICES 20) in Mekelle, Ethiopia. I am indebted to Gideon Goldenberg’s article “‘Oneself, ‘one’s own’ and ‘one another’ in Amharic” (1998), which (though much more briefly) covers some of the same ground as this paper. My thanks also to an anonymous reviewer for Afrika und Übersee.

having the meaning ‘gourd’ pervades the Transversal South Ethiopic (TSE) branch of Ethio-Semitic: Amharic *qəl*, Argobba *qāli*, Harari *qulu*, Silt’i *qula*, *qila*, Wolane *quli* (see Leslau 1963: 123, 1979: III, 474).² It is also found in the Western Gurage language Soddo, where it has the form *qəl* (identical to Amharic, hence possibly a borrowing?) – and apparently nowhere else in Ethio-Semitic, notably not in the classical language Ge’ez. Given this distribution, the etymon is straightforwardly reconstructible as having existed already in Proto-TSE, whence it was inherited (in the sense ‘gourd’) by the daughter language Amharic. Its ultimate genesis in Proto-TSE is not the concern of this paper.³ Note that, outside of Amharic, the meaning always seems to be strictly ‘gourd’.

Amharic *qəl* also has a metaphoric extension to ‘skull, head’. This metaphor can be seen in other languages as well. English has the slang phrase *he’s off his gourd* meaning ‘he’s out of his head, crazy’. Arabic has *qar‘a* ‘gourd; skull, head’ (just cited) (Goldenberg 1998); French has *citrouille* ‘pumpkin, gourd; (slang) head’ (ibid.). There is a rough parallel in Indo-European: one source of IE words for ‘skull’ is ‘shell’ (Buck 1949: 212–14). The semantic grounds for the metaphoric shift are clear: ‘gourd’ and ‘head/skull’ both have a similar shape, size, and hard but breakable exterior. We can see this explicitly in the Amharic idiom *yä-ras qəl* (lit.) ‘of-head gourd’, i.e. ‘skull’. For the semantic extension ‘skull’ > ‘head’, cf. Amharic *č’anqəllat*, lit. ‘skull’, commonly also used to mean ‘head’.

This *qəl* (not just a homonym, see below) also has a number of grammatical uses as an emphatic particle, in several contexts (examples and page references are from Leslau 1995, *Reference grammar of*

2 Of the TSE languages, only Zay lacks any clear cognate to *qəl*. In his 1963 Harari dictionary, Leslau offers Zay *wülle* ‘gourd’ as a cognate, a suggestion that is not repeated in his 1979 Gurage dictionary. Indeed, I have seen no mention of a possible path that might link *wülle* to *qəl*; such a link is imaginable (perhaps **qulle* > **ulle* > *wulle*?), but would be ad hoc and irregular phonologically. (See Meyer 2005: 72–73 for the change *q* > *ʔ* in Zay, but only syllable-finally.)

3 Leslau suggests that it is “probably from Cushitic” (1963: 123), as a number of Cushitic languages also have the word, e.g. Oromo *qulu*, *qilla*, Qabeena and Alaba *qulā*. There are no reliable Semitic cognates outside of Ethiopia. Two similar-looking words in Arabic might conceivably be etymologically relevant: *qulla* ‘jug, pitcher; summit’ and *qar‘a* ‘gourd; skull, head’; the former is a good match formally but not semantically, the latter semantically but not formally. All this is speculation.

Amharic). It should be noted, however, that it is not used as a Plain Reflexive (*he hit himself).

- (1) Intensive Reflexive ‘he himself / you yourself’
əssu qəl-u / antä-w qəl-əh
 he *qəl*-his you-DEF *qəl*-your.2MS (p. 59)
- (2) ‘Separately, apart’ (with the Distributive element *əyyä*)⁴
bä-yyä-qəl or: əyyä-qəl
 in-DISTR-*qəl* DISTR-*qəl* (p. 146)
- (3) Temporal intensifier (optional); frozen form 3MS *qəl-u*
s-irəbä-w (qəl-u) {yəbälall}
 when-hungers-him *qəl*-its {he.will.eat}
 ‘when he is hungry {he will eat}’⁵ (p. 670)
- (4) Conditional intensifier (optional); frozen form 3MS *qəl-u*
X-mm b-ihon (qəl-u)
 X-FOC if-it.is *qəl*-its
 ‘even if it is X; as for X’ (p. 683)
- (5) Concessive intensifier (optional); frozen form 3MS *qəl-u*
b-VB.SIMP.IPFV-mm (qəl-u)
 if-Verb-though *qəl*-its
 ‘even though Verb’ (p. 684–85)

Sentence (6) gives a real text example for usage (5) (thanks to Magdalena Krzyzanowska):

- (6) *bəzu fätäna-wočč-ənnä adäga-wočč*
 many trial-PL-and danger-PL

b-idärs-(ə)bbəññ-əmm qəl-u yalä mənnəm räddat
 if-it.happens-on.me-though *qəl*-its without any helper

täwätəčč-aččäw-allähu
 overcome.GERUND.1SG-them-AUX.1SG
 “Even though many trials and dangers have happened to me,
 I have overcome them without any helper” (Yətbäräk 14: 9-16)

4 When prefixed to a noun, the distributive morpheme *əyyä* conveys the sense “each one in turn” (Leslau 1995: 148).

5 Presumably the temporal-intensifier sense would convey something like ‘Precisely when he is hungry, then he will eat’.

There are a number of preliminary points to note about these constructions. First, in Amharic, the suffix *-u* in *qəl-u* can in general mean either 3MS.possessive ‘his/its’ or the definite article; but its possessive function here is clear from the 2nd-person example *antä-w qəl-əh* ‘you yourself’ (shown in (1) above). Second, the use of *qəl* is rather uncommon in (today’s) Amharic, and is far more a feature of the written than the spoken language. Third, the use of *qəl* is never the only way to express these concepts. In the Intensive Reflexive usage (1), instead of *qəl-u*, speakers more commonly use the Plain Reflexive *ras-u* ‘himself’ (= his-head). In (2), instead of *qəl*, more common are constructions with *(yä)-gəll* ‘self, (one’s) own’ (see below). In (3, 4, 5), frozen *qəl-u* is simply optional, and informants differ when asked about its function; some speakers consider it to be elevated style, while others point to its emphatic function. Assuming an emphatic function in (3, 4, 5), the frozen *qəl-u* would derive from the Intensive Reflexive use, paraphrased as ‘in this selfsame situation itself, in this very case, precisely then’. One can compare German *selbst* ‘self > even (if)’, or French *même* ‘same > even (if)’ (Goldenberg 1998). But why this special development should have happened at all, I do not know.

Arguably, the literal and the grammatical uses of *qəl* are not just homonymy, but represent a case of grammaticalization. Analysis as grammaticalization yields a plausible, motivated etymological source for the grammatical particle, as explained in this paper. No other etymology for the particle has been put forward; and few linguists would reject a plausible etymology in favor of no etymology at all, which is what a claim of homonymy would entail.

Grammaticalization in Semitic as a whole has been the subject of a book-length treatment (Rubin 2005). This of course includes Ethio-Semitic. Indeed, there are numerous examples of grammaticalization in Ethio-Semitic languages, e.g. the change of classical Ge’ez *näbärä* ‘sit’ to a ‘be’-verb (especially as an Auxiliary) in Amharic. The case of *qəl*, however, has gone unmentioned in the limited grammaticalization literature on Amharic, e.g. not in Abinet 2014. Yet the grammaticalization is easy to motivate. A grammaticalization from ‘head’ (or bone, belly, body, spirit, etc.) to Reflexive is well-known, and likewise from ‘head’ to Intensive Reflexive (‘he himself’, see Heine & Kuteva 2002: 168). A grammaticalization path starting from ‘gourd’ would then be mediated by the metaphoric extension from ‘gourd’ to ‘skull, head’:

- (7) *qəl* ‘gourd’ > ‘head’ > Intensive Reflexive (but never Plain Reflexive).

This grammaticalization involves a plant term as its starting point. Such plant-based grammaticalization paths are not common worldwide, as far as I know. Heine & Kuteva (2002) mention only “tree, branch”, grammaticalizing to a classifier. A dramatic case of this kind occurs in the Amazonian language Hup (Epps 2008):

- (8) *teg* ‘stick, tree’ > generic nominalizer > marker of purpose > future (!!).

Epps (2008: 151f., 594ff.) justifies in detail this quite exotic development. Important in these cases is the generic, non-specific nature of ‘stick, tree’. With *qəl* ‘gourd’, by contrast, what is essential is its specific nature (shape, size, hardness), providing the basis for the crucial metaphoric extension to “head”.⁶

Amharic has two other morphemes which overlap functionally with *qəl*: (a) *ras* ‘head’; (b) *gəll* ‘(one’s) own, self’. In order to understand the historical development of *qəl*, it is important to examine these as well. The case of *ras-u* ‘his-head’ is simpler, and I will present it first. In Amharic, as throughout Semitic, *ras* is the ordinary word for ‘head’. Following a very common crosslinguistic pattern, *ras-u* has grammaticalized to a Plain Reflexive (exx. taken from Leslau 1995: 57–60):

- (9) [*ras-u*]-*n* *gäddälä*
 head-his-ACC he.killed
 ‘he killed himself’ (lit. ‘he killed his head’)

This reflexive grammaticalization of *ras-u* ‘his-head’ had already occurred in Ge’ez, where the cognate *rə’s-u* “occurs very frequently” as a reflexive (Dillmann [1907]1974: 345). Reflexive grammaticalization is thus not a development that took place within Amharic, but

6 Amharic yields another possible plant-based grammaticalization, also unmentioned in the grammaticalization literature: Amharic *sər* ‘root’ has taken on the grammaticalized function of a preposition ‘beneath’. Compare Ge’ez *sərw* ‘root’, with cognates throughout Semitic (cf. Leslau 1987: 535). A potential problem is that the meaning of this word in Semitic languages is entangled with the meanings ‘sinew’ and ‘foundation’, so that it is not guaranteed that this was originally specifically a plant term. The exact reconstruction of the Semitic proto-form is also problematic formally. For discussion of this Semitic root see Kogan 2015: 42.

an inheritance from Ge’ez. This stands in clear contrast to the case of *qəl*, which did not even exist in Ge’ez. The Amharic-specific grammaticalization of *qəl* thus occurred against the background of the already-existing grammaticalized *ras*. – Finally, Amharic *ras-u* can also express Intensive Reflexive:

- (10) a. [*əne ras-e*] *nägä* *əmättallä^wh*
 I head-my tomorrow I.will.come
 ‘I myself will come tomorrow’
- b. *yä-[ras-u]* *färäs* *näw*
 of-head-his horse it.is
 ‘it is his own horse’ (‘of himself’)

The case of *gəll* ‘(one’s) own, self’ (Kane 1990, II: 1879–1880) is trickier. Etymologically, a root *g-l-l* occurs throughout Ethio-Semitic with the basic meaning ‘to separate, set aside, set apart’ (Cohen et al. 1993: 126, no.11; Leslau 1987: 191) – thus Ge’ez *gällä*, *gälälä*; Amharic *gällälä* ‘stand aside, retire’; etc. This gives the key to the meaning of the noun *gəll*: ‘individual, one’s own self as set apart from others’. Note that *gəll*, in contrast to *ras* and *qəl*, has nothing to do with grammaticalization from ‘head’. Note also the phonetic similarity between *gəll* and *qəl*; both have the form [Velar.stop - ə - Liquid (single or geminated)]. This will be significant in what follows.

Grammatically, *gəll* requires a preposition: *yä-* ‘of’, *lä-* ‘to/for’, *bä-* ‘in/by’, *bä-yyä-* ‘in-Distributive’ + *gəll*.⁷

The functions of *gəll* are all individuating and emphatic in some way. Most basically, *gəll* can express ‘one’s own, of oneself’ (Leslau 1995: 58-61):

- (11) *yä-gəll* *təqm*
 of-own benefit
 ‘self-interest’
- bä-gəll* *səra*
 by-own work
 ‘by one’s own work, self-employed’

7 All of these might arguably involve *yä-* ‘of’, because of the rule of Amharic morphophonology which regularly converts **bä-yä-* > *bä-*; **lä-yä-* > *lä-*; etc., so that hypothetically **bä-yä-gəll* > *bä-gəll*, etc. (Leslau 1995: 193). I do not see any way of proving this, however.

It can express Intensive Reflexive, a meaning which partly overlaps with ‘one’s own’:

- (12) *məgb-u-n* *bä-mulu* *lä-gəll-u* *adärrägä-w*
 food-DEF-ACC in-full for-own-his he.made-it
 ‘he made all the food for himself’
- (13) *bet-u-n* *bä-gəll-u* *sarrä-w*
 house-DEF-ACC in-own-his he.built-it
 ‘he built the house on his own’

It can express “separately, apart”, when occurring with the Distributive morpheme *-(ə)yyä*:

- (14) *ləj-očč-u* *bä-yyä-gəll-aččäw* *bällu*
 child-PL-DEF in-DISTR-own-their they.ate
 ‘the children ate individually/separately’

But *gəll* cannot express a Plain Reflexive.

The three morphemes (*qəl*, *gəll*, *ras*) exhibit functional overlap, as shown below:

- | | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|---|
| (15) Plain reflexive | Intensive Reflexive | ‘Separately, on one’s own’ | Concessive Intensifier
‘even though’ |
| <i>ras-u</i> | <i>ras-u</i> | | |
| | <i>(yä)-gəll-u</i> | <i>bä-(ə)yyä-gəll</i> | |
| | <i>qəl-u</i> | <i>bä-(ə)yyä-qəl</i> | <i>qəl-u</i> (frozen 3MS) |

As a final observation, it is of interest that we have here two parallel grammaticalizations from two different words meaning ‘head’:

- *ras*: head > Plain Reflexive
- *qəl*: gourd > head > Intensive Reflexive (never means Plain Reflexive)

Note that the two cases yield different outputs. In fact, parallel grammaticalizations with two different outputs occur in other languages, too. In Kilivila, *bwa* and *kai* (both ‘tree’) grammaticalize to different classifiers. Similarly, in Chinese, *shù* and *gè* (both ‘tree’) grammaticalize to different classifiers (Heine & Kuteva 2002:301).

These disparate observations may give the impression of a disjointed hodgepodge. How can we put them all together to reconstruct the grammaticalization history of *qəl* in a way that does justice to all

the above facts? Leading questions to keep in mind are: Why should the two parallel grammaticalizations have occurred at all? And why is the distribution of functions the way it is?

I propose the following scenario: The grammaticalization of *qəl* specifically in Amharic was abetted by its monosyllabic nature, in contrast to bisyllabicity elsewhere in TSE; grammatical morphemes tend to be short. The fact that *qəl* existed alongside an already-grammaticalized reflexive *ras* must also have furthered the process, in that speakers were already familiar with the concept of grammaticalization of a body-part term ‘head’ to a reflexive. However, the pre-existence of *ras* as a Plain Reflexive would have militated against precisely the same grammaticalization of *qəl* to a Plain Reflexive (redundantly). Rather, the grammaticalization trajectory of *qəl* was deflected semantically by its phonetic similarity to *gəll*.⁸ The guiding principle would then be: phonetic similarity can engender semantic similarity, so that two originally distinct morphemes “attract each other”. *Gəll* provided *qəl* with a similar but somewhat different grammaticalization target, a reflexive of a different kind: not a Plain but an Intensive Reflexive. A second factor “pushing” the semantic development of *qəl* to an Intensive Reflexive would have been the intrinsically more “colorful” nature of a word for ‘head’ that comes from ‘gourd’ (a polysemy which speakers could not have been unaware of). Arguably, a “colorful” word would be perceived as stronger than a plain word, thereby iconically favoring an interpretation as Intensive Reflexive (which is stronger than a Plain Reflexive).

In conclusion, I present a summary of points of interest regarding the grammaticalization of *qəl* ‘gourd’:

- a. It is apparently not mentioned in the grammaticalization literature on Amharic (or anywhere?)
- b. Grammaticalization starting from a plant term is not common
- c. Its development is entangled with that of two other grammaticalized words: *gəll*, *ras*
- d. There were two parallel grammaticalizations from ‘head’, with different outcomes

⁸ A salient difference between *qəl* and *gəll* is that *gəll* must take a preposition, while *qəl* generally does not. But there is one parallel construction where both morphemes do take a preposition: both *bä-yyä-qəl* and *bä-yyä-gəll* ‘separately, apart’ take the same compound preposition *bä-(ə)yyä-* ‘in + Distributive’.

- e. Finally, the semantic development of *qəl* was partly guided by (accidental) phonetic similarity to *gəll*. The literature on grammaticalization has not paid much attention to the role played by such fortuitous phonetic resemblance to other morphemes; but cf. the ideas in Heath (1998), and cf. Gensler (2002).

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