

# Intransitive Object Marking in Amharic

Reuben Cohn-Gordon | Stanford University | reubencg@stanford.edu

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## Transitive Object Marking

- (1) a. yimətawal  
b. yi- mət-aw- al  
FUT.SUBJ.3MS hit him<sup>FUT</sup>  
c. “He will hit him.”

## Intransitive Object Marking

Context: A boy left home without permission. His father says:

- (2) a. yimət'al  
b. yi- mət'- al  
FUT.SUBJ.3MS return-FUT  
c. “He will return.”  
(3) a. yimət'atal  
b. yi- mət'- at- al  
FUT.SUBJ.3MS return OBJ.3FS<sup>FUT</sup>  
c. “He *better* return.”

With either male or female object marker:

- (4) a. yizəmbawal  
b. yi- zəmba- w- al  
FUT.3MS rain OBJ.3MS<sup>FUT</sup>  
c. “It’s going to rain a lot!”  
(5) a. yizəmbatal  
b. yi- zəmb- at- al  
FUT.3MS rain OBJ.3FS<sup>FUT</sup>  
c. “It had better rain!”

Embeddings: question, negation, antecedent:

- (6) a. sak'at adəl?  
b. sak'- at  
PAST.SUBJECT.3MS laugh  
adəl  
INTERROGATIVE  
c. “He *will* laugh, right?”  
(7) a. athedatim  
b. at- hed- at- im  
NEG go.2ms OBJ.3FS NEG  
c. “You are *not* going to leave.”  
(8) a. tisik'at əna yigudʒahal  
b. ti- sik'- at .na  
FUT.SUBJ.2MS laugh OBJ.3FS and  
yi- gudʒ- ah- al  
FUT regret OBJ.2MS<sup>int</sup>  
c. “If you *do* laugh, you will regret it.”

## The Phenomenon

- Amharic has infixal object markers that agree in number, person and gender with the definite object of the verb.
- **But it turns out that these object markers can be infixated to intransitive verbs as well.**
- This is not a valency shifting operation, despite the frequency of these in Amharic.
- The only previously documented cases are with masculine infixation, see [2], which only describes the fourth effect below.
- Instead, the intransitive object marker appears to mark a variety of types of focus.

### When Is Intransitive Object Infixation Licensed?

- The object marker must be in the 3rd person singular, but the subject can be any person or number.
- It is possible with any tense or voice, given the right context, so long as the verb is not stative.
- Intransitive object marking is only used in speech, not written narrative.
- Both **masculine** and **feminine** object markers are possible here.

### Effect 1: *Verum Focus*

- Intransitive object infixation is infelicitous in “bare” contexts, e.g. (3) uttered on entry to a room.
- The nature of the contention can be bouletic or epistemic, as with English, e.g. “You *will* run.”

### Effect 2: *Intensive*

- **The masculine object marker has an intensive effect, as in (1). The Amharic definite marker on nouns is conventionally augmentative and the feminine diminutive. “zəmb<sup>w</sup>a” suggests a small fly and “zəmbu” a large one.**
- **The masculine object marker cannot appear on verbs with telic lexical aspect, like *break*.**
- **When the lexical aspect of *break* is made atelic, using the frequentative, the intensive is acceptable, e.g. “tasabbabbəw.”.**

### Effect 3: *Threats*

- **While the masculine object marker intensifies the event for intransitives, the feminine does not act as a diminutive.**
- **Instead, the feminine object marker typically has the flavor of a threat, as in (3).**
- **Even in the past tense, the feminine marker can suggest that the verbal action was performed despite a threat or warning to do otherwise.**

### Effect 4: *Emotion*

- A final effect of intransitive object marker is to convey emotion, usually on the part of the subject.

Object Marker	<i>at</i> : Feminine Singular	<i>w</i> : Masculine Singular
Transitive	Definite Feminine Object	Definite Masculine Object
Intransitive	<i>verum</i> focus, emotion, authority	<i>verum</i> focus, emotion, intensity

## Side-Issue Meaning

- All the effects of intransitive object infixation appear to be side-issue meanings.
- For instance, the intensive and imperative cannot be targeted by negation.

## Conclusions

- The marker denotes focus and the listener can choose one of several conventional ways in which to interpret this marking, depending on gender.
- While more than one of the effects of intransitive infixation can appear at a time, only one ever *need* appear.

## Further Work

- Is the object marker really an object marker at all? [1] shows that the marker is best understood as a doubled clitic.
- What is the origin of intransitive object infixation?
- Is the phenomenon a point of dialectal variation? Consultants associated its use with the dialect of the Gojjam and Gondar regions.

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[1] Ruth Kramer. Clitic doubling or object agreement: the view from Amharic. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 32(2):593-634, 2014.

[2] Wolf Leslau. *Reference grammar of Amharic*. Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995.