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Sequence of Tenses: the Case of Amharic Intentional Sentences**Abstract**

In this paper, I will analyse temporal relations in Amharic intentional sentences in which the subordinate clause is connoted by the verb of the main clause. My approach leads to a schematic presentation of the sequence of tenses rules which govern temporal relations in Amharic intentional sentences. As the obligatory dependent clause of the intentional sentence is always introduced by a verb belonging to a specific group of verbs, I will also propose a list of verbs of this kind and indicate the double semantics of some of them, depending on the [+/- real modality] opposition.

In intentional sentences, the subordinate clause is connoted by the verb of the main clause. According to Grzegorzczkova:¹ “clauses connoted by superordinate verbs have their own temporal characteristics, relativised to the tense of the main clause”, meaning that in intentional sentences, the tense of the subordinate clause is relative to the tense of the main clause, which is an absolute tense. The rules governing the dependence of the tense of the subordinate clause on the tense of the main clause have been termed ‘the sequence of tenses’.

A subordinate clause is an obligatory element, in intentional sentences, complementing the contents of the verb of the main clause. This is why clauses of this kind are referred to as ‘complementary clauses’. “Intentional sentences are introduced by verbs with a specific semantics, mostly those denoting human mental and perceptive states (actions)”.² For example, for the Polish language, a list of about 2000 verbs of this kind

¹ R. Grzegorzczkova, *Wykłady z polskiej składni*, [=Lectures in Polish Syntax], Warsaw: PWN, 1998, p. 112.

² *Ibid.* p. 107.

has been compiled,³ but for Amharic, there is no such list. Therefore, in Section 4 of this paper I will propose a short list generated from my data corpus. The research data comes mainly from the Amharic version of the *Gospel according to Matthew*.⁴

As regards conjunctions introducing the subordinate clause of intentional sentences in Amharic, there is the conjunction *inde-* with its ‘tense/aspect’ variant *indemm-*, as well as the conjunctions *ind-*, *l-* and *zend*⁵ that are used for creating intentional meanings. I would, of course, expect this to be confirmed by my data corpus. Regarding inter-clause temporal relations, I will analyse anteriority, posteriority and simultaneity.

This paper is a critical elaboration of an excerpt from my PhD dissertation, it was inspired and supervised by Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niećko, who has been an important influence both on my academic career and on my overall development as a human being.

1. Anteriority

By anteriority I understand that the event/activity/state expressed by the subordinate clause started before the event/action/state of the main clause. First, I will discuss temporal relations in sentences following the pattern:

- (1) *inde(-)perf perf*⁶

This pattern is used in the corpus with the main verbs: *ayye* ‘saw’, *semma* ‘heard’, *awwek’e* ‘knew’, *astewale* ‘understood’, *neggere* ‘spoke’, *t’eyyek’e* ‘asked’. Example (2) denotes temporal simultaneity between two activities, even though the context might indicate another possibility, i.e. the anteriority of the subordinate clause. The double value allows an inclusion of this pattern into the anteriority group.

- (2) *bezzīyan gēzē dek’e mezamurtu sile met’mik’u sile yohannis inde neggerachchew astewalu.* (Mt 17,13)

‘Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.’

³ See: Z. Zaron, *Ze studiów nad składnią i semantyką czasownika: Polskie czasowniki z uzupełnieniem werbalnym oznaczające relację osobową z argumentem zdarzeniowym*, [=From Studies in the Syntax and Semantics of the Verb: Polish Verbs with a Verbal Complement Denoting a Personal Relation with an Event Argument], Wrocław 1981, and S. Karolak, *Składnia wyrażen predykatywnych* [=The Syntax of Predicative Utterances], Warszawa 1984.

⁴ *Mets’haf k’iddus* (The Holy Bible), The Bible in Amharic, United Bible Societies, 1962.

⁵ Transcription according to: *Romanization Guide Transliteration System for Amharic. BGN/PC 1967 System*. Revised and Enlarged Edition. The Office of the Geographer, Directorate for Functional Research, Bureau of Intelligence and Research U.S. Board on Geographic Names, 1972.

⁶ The following abbreviations are used in the text: *perf* for *perfectum* (past tense form), *impc* for compound *imperfectum* (present-future tense form), *imps* for simple *imperfectum* (non-finite form of the present-future tense), *gerc* for compound *gerundivum* (present perfect form), *imper* for *imperativus*.

In additional text corpuses I found clear-cut examples of anteriority expressed by pattern (1), as in:

- (3) *inatu inde-motechch tinantinna semma*
 his.mother that-died.3sgf yesterday heard.3sgm
 ‘Yesterday he heard that his mother died.’

Pattern (4) *inde(-)perf impc* also denotes the anteriority of a subordinate clause. It is used in my corpus with the verbs *astewale* ‘understood’ and *tiz alew* ‘remembered, recalled’, e.g.

- (5) *sint mesobim indannesachchihu tiz aylachchihumin?*
 ‘Do you not remember how many baskets you gathered?’ (Mt 16,9)
 or
 (6) *kefarisawyaninna keseduk’awyan irsho inditt’ebbek’u biē sile injera indaltene-ggerhwachchihu indēt attastawlumin?*
 ‘How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!’ (Mt 16,11)
 (lit. Why do not you understand that I was not speaking of [...])

In pattern (7) *inde(-)perf gerc*, there is a compound gerund verb form in the matrix sentence, which has several functions in the present and past tenses. In example (8), its function is limited to “designating an action completed in the past but resulting at the present time”,⁷ and I will classify it as a tense-aspect form. Pattern (7) is used in my corpus with the verbs *anebbebe* ‘read’ and *semma* ‘heard’, as in:

- (8) *lek’edemut “attgidel” inde tebale semtachchihwal;* (Mt 5,21)
 ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder.”’

The Amharic translation of sentence (8) indicates the anteriority of the subordinate activity by means of an additional expression *lek’edemut* – ‘to those of ancient times’. Therefore, despite the aspectual character of the compound gerund form, I regard this relation as one of anteriority. The main verb form is influenced by the context and its pragmatics, which has nothing to do with the internal temporal relation within the compound sentence.

Pattern (9) *ind-imps impc* denotes anteriority for present-future actions. It is used in the text corpus with the verbs *messele* ‘thought’ and *neggere* ‘said’, as in:

⁷ L. Łykowska, *Temporal Relation Markers in Amharic*, SDALC, 31, 2002, p. 18.

- (10) *innantem yachchin bitinegruny inē degmo innezthin bemin silt'an indaderg ineg-rachchihwalehu*; (Mt 21,24)
 '[...] If you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.'

2. Simultaneity

Simultaneity means that both actions occurred at the same time, either continuously or at specific points in time. The first pattern regarding the past tense action of the matrix sentence is pattern (1) *inde(-)perf perf*. It was presented above in Section 1 as a pattern with a double meaning. In sentence (11), unlike in sentence (2) of Section 1 following the same pattern, simultaneity is obvious.

- (11) *beabbatum behērodis fenta arkēlawos beyihuda inde neggese besemma gīzē, wedezzīya mehēdin ferra behilmim teredito wede galila ager hēde*; (Mt 2,22)
 'But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.'

In example (11) we see verb forms denoting two past actions which are simultaneous with each other and take the same tense form. In sentence (13), following pattern (12) *ind-imps perf*, the situation is quite the opposite. I conclude from the aktionsart of the subordinate action 'to pass' that both actions, the subordinate and the superordinate one, continued simultaneously throughout their duration.

- (13) *innehom, hulett iwrochch bemenged dar tek'emt'ew, īyesus indīyalf besemmu gīzē - gēta hoy, yedawīt lij, maren bilew ch'oku*;
 'There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"'
 (Mt 20,30)

In (13), two simultaneous past actions are denoted by various tense forms, i.e. the simultaneous action of the subordinate clause is expressed by a present-future tense form, and the main verb by a past tense form. In respect to what I have observed above, this example is a little bit confusing, and the question is if I am the only person confused? To make sure, I examined two other versions of the Amharic Bible⁸ and found out that in each of them the sentence looks different, being translated with the present tense throughout the sentence (the 1961 version) or with one of the actions, namely 'passing', rendered by means of nominalization (the 2005 version). This could suggest that the translations were

⁸ *The New Testament in Amharic*, London and Addis-Ababa: The British & Foreign Bible Society, 1951, and *Amharic Bible*, International Bible Society, 2005 (Internet source).

not clear enough and were therefore repeatedly changed. Especially given that this is also the case with (Mt 27,24), built according to the same pattern, i.e. the verb forms used in Amharic Bible translations differ from one version to another. Therefore, I conclude that this pattern is disputable for expressing the simultaneity of past actions. The only reasonable explanation for using a future tense form to express an activity simultaneous to a past action could be the intrinsic character of the two meanings, ‘hearing’ and ‘passing by’, where the action of ‘passing by’ could be treated as something that occurred BEFORE, DURING and AFTER ‘hearing’, with the future tense form of ‘passing by’ referring to the whole interval. This would testify to the complex perception of the internal temporal structure of actions by Amharic speakers, who would analyse them (actions) very precisely, especially while explaining temporal relations between them. To accept this explanation would force me to put pattern (12) into the “posteriority” section, which is far from my intuition concerning temporal relations, but which would agree with the Amharic sequence of tenses rules.

I also found in my text corpus one example of pattern (14) *indemm-imps imper*, which cannot be simply analysed on the level of temporal relations because the main verb is a tenseless imperative. Nevertheless, because of the dramatic scarcity of examples with the *indemm-* conjunction in my text corpus I have decided to include it into my description.⁹ The *indemm-* variant of the conjunction ‘that’, introducing the *imps* verb form, occurs only once in my text corpus, in the following sentence:

- (15) [...] *belibachchihum „abriham abbat allen“ indemmtilu aymiselachchihu*, [...] (Mt 3,9)
 ‘[...] Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”[...]’
 (lit. Do not think that you can say to yourself [...])

I treat this pattern as one corresponding to (16) *ind-imps impc*, as in:

- (17) [...] *yihinnis hullu indīyasfelligachchihu yesemayu abbatachchihu yawik‘allinna*.
 ‘[...] and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.’ (Mt 6,32)

Pattern (16) denotes the simultaneity of the subordinate action with the main action, situated in the present or future (ex. 17), but also, as I will show in Section 3, can be responsible for the posteriority of a subordinate action in relation to the main one.

⁹ Dawkins notes the rarity of the conjunction *indemm-* in the Biblical text, saying that in the Bible, the conjunction *ind-* occurs in place of the conjunction *indemm-*; (C.H. Dawkins 1969, p. 104). This may be said to be a historical feature in the evolution of the Amharic language and I will comment on this question in the Results section. In contemporary Amharic, a distinction between these two forms has already been drawn.

3. Posteriority

If the action of a subordinate clause is to start after the action of the main one, the sentence denotes the relation of posteriority. For example, pattern (16) *ind*-imps perf expresses posteriority, putting the main verb in the past tense,¹⁰ as in:

- (18) *asra hulettun dek'e mezamurtun wede irsu t'erto, indiyawet'uachchew berikusan menafst lay dewenna himemanim hullu indifewesu silt'an set't'achchew.*
 'Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.' (Mt 10,1)

This patterns is used in my corpus with the following verbs in the main position: *anebbebe* 'read', *t'eyyek'e* 'asked', *ayye* 'saw', *silt'an set't'e* 'gave authority', *semma* 'hear', as in:

- (19) *yekahinatinim alek'ochch yehizbunim ts'afochch hullu sebsibo kristos wedet inditweled t'eyyek'achchew.* (Mt 2,4)
 'And calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.'

Another pattern representing posteriority to situate the main action in the present/future and the subordinate one afterwards is pattern (20) *ind*-imps impc:

- (21) *ahzabim bemenagerachchew bizat inditsemu yimeslachchewallinna sitits'elyu inde innersu bekentu attidigemu.* (Mt 6,7)
 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.'

4. The Modality of Amharic Intentional Sentences

In the previous sections we examined a group of verbs which require a subordinate clause, introduced by the conjunction *ind-/inde-/indemm-*, depending on the temporal relation to be denoted, to make the sentence complete. A split of the semantic function of the conjunction *ind-*, which in modern Amharic blocks tense and does not occur in the semantic function of 'that', proves that some verbs which, as used in modern Amharic texts, would have to be assigned to separate groups, can be put together into a group of intentional verbs. A more precise analysis of the other conjunctions from the *ind-* 'so that' group, such as *l-* and *zend*, produced the results presented in columns 3–5

¹⁰ In fact, this sentence does not express any temporal relation and belongs to the group of *ind-* 'so that' sentences, classified in Section 4 as those of unreal modality.

of Table 1. As we can see there, some of the verbs belonging to this group can be used with any of these conjunctions to express the same meaning, which shows that the three conjunctions have the same semantic function. Another issue is the verb form attached to the conjunctions under discussion, which is always a simple imperfect form. The three conjunctions block tense. This could mean they do not have to mark temporal relations. Thus, the specific use of conjunctions is a basis for dividing intentional sentences into two groups:

- (22) 1. Those which require a tense-sensitive conjunction (1&2 in Table 1),
2. Those which require a tense-blocking conjunction (3–5 in Table 1).

Furthermore, Table 1 shows that there are at least two verbs which belong to both groups, and these are *assebe* ‘he thought’ and *ale* ‘he says’, as in example (23) following the pattern *inde*-perf *b*-imps, and (24) following the pattern *l*-imps perf:

- (23) *ingidīh mebahin bemesewīyaw lay bitak’erb, bezzīyam wendimih andachch beante lay indalew bitasib, bezzīya bemesewīyaw fīt mebahin titeh hīd, ask’edmihim kewendimih gar tarek’*, [...]

‘So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister [...]’ (Mt 5,23–24)

- (24) *ich’ch’onynyawa yosēfim ts’adk’ hono līgelt’at silalweddede besiwir lītewat assebe*.

‘Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.’ (Mt 1,19)

These two verbs help explain the difference between the two groups of (22). In my opinion and according to the data available, the *assebe* of (23) is a purely mental verb, while the *assebe* of (24) is a mental verb with an element of volition, so the two meanings are slightly different. In construction (24), the tense-blocking conjunction *l-* is used, unlike (23), where the conjunction *inde-* can be used with a present-future or a past tense verb form. This could suggest that the mental verb with an element of volition (24) expresses a kind of required but not real modality, while a real modality expression should be identified with a real and tensed action. Therefore, the first group of verbs expresses real and tense-sensitive modality, and the second one unreal modality devoid of any temporal relations in a sentence.¹¹

¹¹ See: R. Grzegorzczkova, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

Table 1. Amharic Intentional Verbs

1. <i>inde(-)perf</i>	2. <i>ind/indemm-imps</i>	3. <i>ind-imps</i>	4. <i>l-imps</i>	5. <i>imps zend</i>
<i>assebe</i> [*] <i>anebbebe</i> <i>astewale</i> <i>awwek'e</i> <i>ayye</i> <i>neggere</i> <i>semma</i> <i>tiz alew</i> <i>ale</i>	<i>ammene</i> <i>anebbebe</i> <i>awwek'e</i> <i>ayye</i> <i>gellet'e</i> <i>messele</i> <i>neggere</i> <i>semma</i> <i>temelekkete</i> <i>t'eyyek'e</i>	<i>fek'k'ede</i> <i>lemmene</i> <i>weddede</i> <i>ale</i> <i>aderrege</i> <i>azzeze</i> <i>gessets'e</i> <i>gid alew</i> <i>silt'an set't'e</i> <i>teredda</i> <i>tet'enek'k'ek'e</i>	<i>fek'k'ede</i> <i>lemmene</i> <i>weddede</i> <i>assebe</i> <i>ak'atta</i> <i>asfellege</i> <i>chale</i> <i>fellege</i>	<i>fek'k'ede</i> <i>asgeddede</i> <i>ale</i> <i>kelekkele</i> <i>mebt alew</i> <i>silt'an alew</i> <i>tefek'k'ede</i>

* Translations of these verbs are given in Sections 1–3. The verbs are attributed to specific sentence patterns they appeared within in my corpus.

5. Results

The results of my analysis of the sequence of tenses in Amharic intentional sentences are shown in Table 2 below. They include patterns of real modality sentences only, as unreal modality intentional sentences must be excluded because of their tense-blocked character.

Table 2. Patterns of Amharic Sequence of Tenses

anteriority	simultaneity	posteriority
<i>inde(-)perf perf</i> <i>inde(-)perf impc</i> <i>inde(-)perf gerc</i>	<i>inde(-)perf perf</i> <i>ind-imps impc</i> <i>indemm-imps imper</i> [<i>ind-imps perf</i>]>	<i>ind-imps perf</i> <i>ind-imps impc</i>

Undoubtedly, I have not been able to identify all patterns occurring in Amharic, and the missing ones include mainly sentences with other tense forms in the matrix sentence position. Nonetheless, it is still possible to propose a model of sequence of tenses for Amharic based on the data available. The sequence of verb forms in Amharic corresponds to the temporal relations between the actions expressed. For example, if we want to denote anteriority, the anterior action must, if possible, be expressed by a tensed verb form, its tense being anterior to the tense of the main verb. If this is not possible, the

subordinate form must have the same value as the main one, and in this case additional elements, such as adverbs, may be used to help indicate the sequence.

The main problem I met during my research was the specific character of my text corpus, namely the lack of the *indemm-* conjunction. It was confusing especially in the case of subordinate future tense forms. The differentiation of *ind-/indemm-* is a basic issue in contemporary Amharic and, as shown in Section 4, enables expressing two different meanings of the same verb (the example of *assebe* 'he thought'). Therefore, the text corpus that I used is not really appropriate for the purpose of analysing the sequence of tenses.

On the other hand, this deficiency attracted my attention to the problem of double modality of intentional verbs. I think that my confusion caused by the lack of a specific form of conjunction could be a result and, so to say, a continuation of the translators' confusion over the relevant excerpts. Nevertheless, this deficiency can hardly be attributed to the translators' ignorance, so I tend to regard it, rather, as a hint indicating the grammatical development of Amharic, which reveals the process of the grammatical evolution of certain meanings.

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