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# The approximative derivation in Kambaata (Cushitic)

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# Aim of my paper

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Detailed account of the approximative derivation with *-lab* in Kambaata

(1) *biishsh-i-láb-aa kin-íin*  
red-EP-APRX-M.OBL stone-M.ICP  
'with reddish stones' (Saint-Exupéry 2018: 19)

(2) *dagud-lab-á marámm (...)*  
run-APRX-M.ACC walk.1SG.PFV.CV  
'(I) almost running there (...)'

(3) *marf-lab-á ut-ichch-ú*  
needle-APRX-M.ACC thorn-SGV-M.ACC  
'a needle-like thorn'

Lexical base

Syntactic function

Adjective plus APRX

Modifier in NP

Verb plus APRX

Adverbial modifier

Noun plus APRX

Modifier in NP

incorrect  
translation  
in the  
squib!

# What's noteworthy about the Kambaata approximative?

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- Overlooked in earlier descriptions (*mea culpa* ...)
- Productive
- Little (if any) selection restrictions
- (To the best of my knowledge) no formally or functionally related approximative derivation in related languages or languages of the area
- Transparent (at least for the linguist!) diachronic source

# Brief introduction into the language (I)

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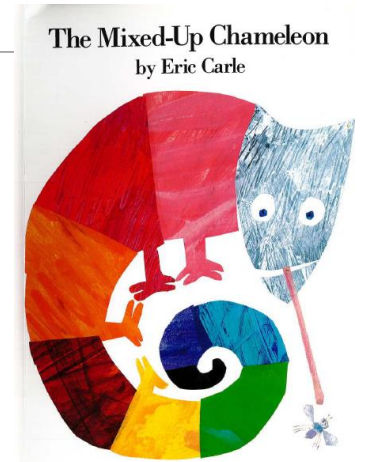
- Afro-Asiatic > Cushitic > East Cushitic ... > Highland East Cushitic
- SW Ethiopia
- (2007:) > 600.000 speakers
- Official orthography based on the Roman script (di- and trigraphs are preferred over diacritics) > used to write the data in my papers

# Data sources

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- First attestation in a conversation I recorded and transcribed in 2006

*Baar-lab-áta*      *ik-k*      *fad-dóo'u*  
yellow-APRX-F.ACC become-3F.PFV.CV do.completely-3F.PFV  
'She (= the chameleon) became **yellowish**.' (TD2016-02-11\_001)



- Numerous attestations in Alemu (2016), a Kambaata dictionary in which each entry has a monolingual definition
- > Data extracted from Alemu (2016) = basis for the collection of example sentences and mock dialogues
- At present: 199 tokens/78 types of *-lab*-derivatives (and counting)
- Very few unsolicited examples

# Kambaata open word classes

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- Verbs, nouns, **adjectives**, ideophones and interjections
- Defining feature of adjectives:
  - **Case/gender-agreeing** modifier in the NP
  - Reduced case system: nominative, accusative, oblique
  - 5 declensions (A1 = biggest declension)
- Other syntactic functions
  - As head of NP (marked for 9 cases like nouns)
  - As predicates (predicative case plus copula)
  - As adverbial modifiers (invariantly M.ACC)

Case form	M	F
Accusative	<i>farr-á</i>	<i>farr-áta</i>
Nominative	<i>fárr-u</i>	<i>fárr-at</i>
Oblique	<i>fárr-a(a)</i>	<i>fárr-a(ta)</i>

Table 2. Case/gender inflection of an adjectival modifier:  
The example of *farr-á(ta)* ‘bad’ (declension A1)

# Adjectivizing derivation

- Large class of basic (underived) adjectival lexemes
- 5 productive (and several unproductive or frozen) adjectivizers

Derivation	Morphological structure	Example
Proprietary	Noun- <i>aam</i> -Case+Gender	e.g. <i>orc-á</i> ‘mud’ > <i>orc-aam-ú</i> (M) / <i>-íta</i> (F) ‘muddy’
Agentive	Verb/Noun- <i>aan</i> -Number-Case+Gender	e.g. <i>dimb-</i> ‘be(come) drunk’ > <i>dimb-aan-ch-ú(ta)</i> ‘drunkard’
Resultative	Ideophone- <i>eem</i> -Case+Gender	e.g. <i>dákk=y-</i> ‘be hidden’ > <i>dákk-eem-á(ta)</i> ‘hidden’
Privative	Noun- <i>beel</i> -Case+Gender	e.g. <i>wozan-á</i> ‘heart’ > <i>wozan-beel-ú(ta)</i> ‘forgetful (lit. heartless)’ <sup>4</sup>
Approximative	Adjective/Verb/Noun/etc.- <i>lab</i> -Case+Gender	e.g. <i>mux-á(ta)</i> ‘wet’ > <i>mux-(i)lab-á(ta)</i> ‘a bit wet’

~ ‘possessing N, full of N, containing N’

~ ‘V-er, who/which V-s’

~ ‘who/which has been IDEO-ed’

~ ‘N-less’

Table 3. Productive adjectivizing derivations

# Compound adjectives

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- Stem 1 + Stem 2 + *-á(ta)*  
(case/gender morphology of A1 declension)

ADJ		N	
<i>mat-ú/íta</i>	+	<i>ill-íta</i>	> <i>mat-ill-á(ta)</i>
one-M/F.ACC	+	eye-F.ACC	> one-eye-M/F.ACC

‘one-eyed’

N		V	
<i>bun-á</i>	+	<i>agud-</i>	> <i>bun-agud-á(ta)</i>
coffee-M.ACC	+	resemble-	> coffee-resemble-M/F.ACC

‘brown’ (lit. coffee-resembling)



# Approximative adjective: morphological makeup

		Approximative derivation	Case/gender inflection
A – N – V stem		(epenthetic <i>-i</i> )	<i>-lab</i>
Root	(Derivation)		

Figure 1. Morphological structure of approximative adjectives

Base	Simple	Extended	All
Adjective	21	5	26
Verb	17	3	20
Noun (common noun)	26	1	27
Other (ideophone, proper noun, numeral)	2	1	3
Undetermined	2	-	2
<b>Total</b>	68	10	<b>78</b>

Table 4. Distribution of attested *-lab*-derivate types across word classes

# Approximative adjective: syntactic functions

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Irrespective of the word class of the base, approximative adjectives are used (like all other adjectives!) as

- Case/gender-agreeing adnominal modifiers
- Heads of NPs, marked for the gender of the omitted noun (if one is retrievable), case-marked acc. to the function in the clause
- Non-verbal predicates, agreeing with the subject in gender
- Adverbial modifiers (invariably masculine accusative)
- Cf. examples below

# Meaning of deadjectival approximatives

- **Attenuated property:** Most frequently attested bases are colour adjectives (recall chameleon example), but not only (see below): ‘a bit [property], [property]-ish, somewhat [property]’, ~ lower middle ground of a scale

(20) A: *Oddishsh-at tadá mool-táa'u, aag-ís-i!*  
clothes-F.NOM by.now become.dry-3F.IPFV enter-CAUS1-2SG.IMP

B: *Mux-i-láb-a-anta, qah-únka hád-a-n*  
wet-EP-APRX-F.PRED-F.COP2<N> small-M.ACC<EMP> outside-F.OBL-EMP

*egér-tun*  
wait-3F.JUS

A: ‘The clothes should be dry by now, bring (them) in!’ –

B (goes to check:) ‘They are (still) **a bit wet**, leave (them) outside for a little (while).’ (Field notes 3/2018)

= example of a “mock-dialogue”

# Meaning of **deverbal** approximatives

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- **Approximate manner**: ‘in a kind of V-ing, in an almost V-ing manner’ (not: ‘in a bit of a V-ing manner’); close to the maximum degree of similarity

(Person reports about an incident in the bakery: I wanted to buy bread for the child, but when I looked for money in my bag, there was none.)

(24) *Shay-í*      *min-í*              *adab-áa*      *uucc-aqq-(i)-lab-á*  
tea-M.GEN   house-M.GEN   boy-M.ACC   beg-MID-EP-**APRX**-M.ACC

*ass-eemmi=dá-a*

*kámm-o-’e*

do-1SG.PFV.REL=COND-ADD

reject-3M.PFV-1SG.OBJ

‘Even though **I kind of/almost begged** (lit. I did it in an almost begging manner) the tea house boy (i.e. the seller) for my benefit, he rejected to give (the bread) to me.’ (Field notes 3/2018)

# Meaning of denominal approximatives (1)

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- Similarity in quality or character: ‘similar to/almost like N in quality or character, of the same type’ (recall the ‘needle-like thorn’), not primarily: ‘similar in appearance’

(27) *weteechch-lab-á*      *haqq-á*  
tree.sp-APRX-M.ACC    tree-M.ACC

‘a *weteechchu*-like tree (*weteechchu* is a tree with slow-burning fragrant wood)’ (Alemu 2016: 147 used for the definition of a lesser-known tree species)

- In the dictionary, denominal approximatives often create ad-hoc categories on the basis of a salient, well-known exponent (e.g. a well-known tree). The ad-hoc category is then recruited to characterize another, less-known exponent (e.g. a little-known tree).

## Meaning of denominal approximatives (2)

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- **Similarity in quality or character** > sometimes interpreted as: ‘not up to standard, not a proper N’; but approximatives are **not** generally transporting a negative connotation/evaluative

(30) *Ann-i-sí*                      *urr-óon*                      *min-lab-á*  
father-M.GEN-3M.POSS   front.yard-F.LOC   house-APRX-M.ACC

*uurr-íshsh-ee* ‘u  
stand-CAUS1-3M.PRF

‘He has built **a kind of house** (= not a proper house in the speaker’s mind) in his father’s front yard.’ (Field notes 3/2018)

# Diachrony

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- Verb root *lab-* ‘resemble’ in related Cushitic languages (unattested in Kambaata and not known by any speakers consulted)
- Origin of approximative adjectives: compound adjectives with ‘resemble’

Historical development:

*Compound adjective: Stem 1 + *Stem 2 ( <i>lab-</i> ) + Inflection	→	Derived adjective Stem 1 + APRX-Derivation + Inflection
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NB: compound-like approximative adjectives belong to declension A1 in *-á(ta)*

- Today the verb *\*lab-* has been replaced in Kambaata by *agud-* ‘resemble’ (which is itself also used in compounds)

# Summary: Kambaata approximative derivation

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- Productive, albeit infrequently used derivational mechanism (if compared e.g. to the propriative derivation).
  - But: native speakers come up with new examples spontaneously.
- Morphology/Syntax
  - Few (if any) selection restrictions re bases to which they attach
  - Derivates belong to the word-class of adjectives (cf. agreement behaviour)
  - Like basic adjectives: used as modifiers in the NP, heads of the NP, in predicative and adverbial function
- Meaning
  - Adjectival base > attenuated degree of a property
  - Verbal base > approximate, almost (not quite) identical manner
  - Nominal base > similarity in nature, character, function
- Diachronic source: \**lab-* ‘resemble’