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## The approximative derivation in Kambaata (Cushitic)

Abstract 1: This paper is a synchronic analysis of the productive, word class-changing approximative derivation in Kambaata, a Cushitic language of Ethiopia. The paper discusses the morphology, syntax and meanings of approximative adjectives and proposes a verb ‘resemble’ as a likely diachronic source for the approximative morpheme. [323 characters].

Abstract 2: Kambaata, a Cushitic language of Ethiopia, has a productive, word-class changing approximative derivation. The process marked by the suffix *-lab* takes adjectival, nominal and verbal roots as inputs and generates approximatives that belong to the adjective word class, whose members are characterized by their agreement behaviour in the NP. The meaning of the Kambaata approximatives is dependent on the word class of its input. Deadjectival approximatives express a vague, attenuated degree of a property, deverbal forms convey similarity or near-identity in manner, while denominal forms express similarity in nature or function and create adhoc categories. The sub-meanings are subsumable under an overarching meaning of approximation, understood as deviation from a prototypical realisation. The source of the *-lab*-suffix is a verb ‘resemble’. From a Cushitic perspective, the Kambaata approximative derivation is unique of its kind. No related language is known to have approximative morphology. [999 characters]

Keywords: approximation, derivation, adjective, adjectivisation, Cushitic

## The approximative derivation in Kambaata (Cushitic)

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### 1. Introduction

Kambaata, a Cushitic language spoken in Ethiopia, has a productive, recently grammaticalised approximative derivation. The derivational process marked by the suffix *-lab* (APRX) generates adjectives on the basis of adjectival (1), verbal (2) or nominal roots (3), in order to express a reduced (attenuated) degree of a property, e.g. ‘red’ > ‘reddish’ (1), a near prototypical way of carrying out an action, e.g. ‘run’ > ‘(in an) almost running (manner)’ (2), or a resemblance in nature and character, e.g. ‘needle’ > ‘needle-like (object)’ (3).

- (1) *biishsh-i-láb-aa kin-ín*  
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.CVB  
‘(I) went (there) almost running (...)’
- (3) *marf-lab-á ut-ichch-ú*  
needle-APRX-M.ACC thorn-SGV-M.ACC  
‘a needle-like thorn’

In contrast to some other Cushitic languages in which the existence of adjectives is debatable (cf. Banti 1988; Mous 2012: 358; 377–379), Kambaata has a clearly identifiable adjective word class, which is defined on the basis of morphosyntactic criteria. Apart from many morphologically simple adjectives, Kambaata has several adjectivizing processes that allow for the creation of a theoretically unlimited number of derived adjectives (cf. Alemu 2016, which contains not less than 1731 (sub-)entries labelled “sc”, the language-internal abbreviation for “adjective”).<sup>1</sup>

This paper focusses on a synchronic analysis of the Kambaata approximative derivation from a typological perspective. Earlier work on Kambaata adjectives has overlooked this derivational process, even though fairly detailed descriptions of the inflectional and derivational morphology of adjectives are found in Treis (2008: 254–302; 2011; 2017a: 349–

<sup>1</sup> The label “sc” stands for *su'mm-caakkisaanchu* ‘adjective’; an analysis of this term is later provided in (20).

351). The paper also proposes a likely diachronic source for the approximative morpheme and thus seeks to enrich the discussion of possible sources of approximative morphology cross-linguistically. Finally, this study wants to further our understanding of adjectival derivational processes in Cushitic – a field that is hitherto hardly explored (cf. the very brief notes in Mous 2012: 379; Shay 2014: 581).

The discussion is structured as follows. After a brief general introduction into the language and the data collection methodology in §2, I sketch the typological profile of the language and introduce the defining features of open word classes in §3. §4 gives an overview of Kambaata’s adjectivizing processes. §5, the core of the paper, discusses the morphology, syntax and semantics of approximative adjectives, shows that an overarching meaning can be attributed to *-lab* and points out competing processes with an approximative meaning. §6 discusses the likely origin of the *-lab*-derivation and proposes a grammaticalization chain. §7 concludes the paper.

## **2. The language**

### ***2.1. Classification and speaker area***

The Kambaata language (iso-code: [ktb](#), glottolog code: [kam1316](#)) is spoken by the Kambaata, Xambaaro and Donga people, who settle around the Hambarrichcho massif in southern Ethiopia, about 300km southwest of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. According to the last census, Kambaata has more than 600,000 speakers (Central Statistical Agency 2007: 74), the large majority of which live in the Kambaata-Xambaaro Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State. Kambaata belongs to the Highland East Cushitic branch of the Cushitic family (Afroasiatic phylum). The immediate neighbours of the Kambaata are speakers of other Highland East Cushitic languages (Hadiyya and Alaaba) and Ometo languages of the Omotic family (Wolaitta and Dawro). Amharic, the Ethiopian lingua franca, is the most important second language of Kambaata speakers.

### ***2.2. Orthography***

The official Kambaata orthography is based on the Roman script (Treis 2008: 73–80, Alemu 2016) and follows the spelling conventions of Oromo. The official orthography is adopted in this contribution with one important adaptation: Phonemic stress is consistently marked by an acute accent. The following graphemes are not in accordance with IPA conventions: <ph> /pʰ/, <x> /tʰ/, <q> /kʰ/, <j> /dʒ/, <c> /tʃ/, <ch> /tʃ/, <sh> /ʃ/, <y> /j/ and <'> /ʔ/. Geminate

consonants and long vowels are marked by doubling, e.g. <shsh> /ʃ:/ and <ee> /e:/.

Nasalisation is marked by a macron, e.g. <ā> /ã/.

### **2.3. Data collection**

The data for this paper comes from a corpus of recorded narratives and conversations, my field notes of volunteered or elicited data as well as a corpus of locally published written texts. In the fieldwork data collected between 2002 and 2007 in the Kambaata-Xambaaro Zone, no derivatives with *-lab* are attested – which explains why this process is not addressed in Treis (2008). The first two attestations are in a recording of a conversation made in 2016, which permitted the elicitation of some additional examples. The database on *-lab*-derivates was significantly extended when Alemu’s (2016) dictionary was published. The monolingual definitions that follow each lexical entry in this comprehensive work are a rich data source for the study of the approximative derivation; the definitions contain altogether as many as 61 types (144 tokens) of *-lab*-derivates. In a fieldtrip in 2018, I extracted these examples from the dictionary, discussed their forms and meanings with two native speakers (DWD, SWD) and asked them to exemplify their use in near-natural sentences or mock-dialogues, i.e. question-answer or statement-comment pairs of two imagined interlocutors. In the following years (2019-2022), 14 more *-lab*-tokens were obtained, at different occasions, in solicited and unsolicited data from three different speakers (TS, DWD and AYZ). Finally, the recently published collection of Kambaata idioms (Alamu 2022) contains 9 additional examples. At present, my database contains altogether 84 types of *-lab*-derivates (209 tokens).

Three categories of data are distinguished by the labels after each example: (i) recorded, spontaneously produced data (marked by the initials of the recorded speaker’s name, the date and the file number), (ii) written data (marked by a literature reference) and (iii) data elicited and volunteered in the field and in remote fieldwork sessions (labelled “elicited”). In the elicitation process, translation elicitation was intentionally avoided. Speakers were instead provided with word forms for which they formulated example sentences or dialogs, or they were asked to paraphrase/reformulate existing examples.

### **3. Typological profile and word classes**

Kambaata has a consistently head-final constituent order; the final element in a sentence is usually a fully finite main verb or a copula. The language is agglutinating-fusional and (almost) exclusively suffixing. Apart from a number of closed classes, the following open word classes can be defined morphosyntactically: verbs, nouns, adjectives, ideophones and

interjections. Verbal, nominal and adjectival roots are bound, i.e. they cannot occur in isolation but combine obligatorily with inflectional morphology. Lexical roots and derivational morphemes are undetermined for stress, while inflectional morphemes consist of a segmental component and a suprasegment (stress) that is realised, dependent on the grammatical category to be marked, on a specific syllable of the inflected word form. Kambaata is a nominative-accusative language. The nominative is the subject case; the accusative marks direct objects and certain adverbial constituents, and also serves as the citation form of nouns. Nouns are obligatorily marked for gender (masculine vs. feminine). The assignment of grammatical gender is mostly arbitrary, with the exception of nouns referring to human beings and higher animals, where it is sex-based; see, e.g., the arbitrary assignment of masculine gender to the term for a whole enset leaf,<sup>2</sup> *habar-á*, and of feminine gender to the term for an enset leaf from which the midrib was torn off and which is used as underlay, padding or wrapping, *faatt-áta* (Table 1). Nouns distinguish nine case forms, all of which are marked by a segmental suffix and a specific stress pattern. Stress is phonemic and serves – either alone or in combination with a segmental suffix – to distinguish between grammatical forms of one lexeme. Nouns are categorised into altogether 21 declensions (Treis 2008: 103).

Case form	<i>habar-á</i> (M) 'enset leaf'	<i>faatt-áta</i> (F) 'enset leaf without the midrib'
Accusative	<i>habar-á</i>	<i>faatt-áta</i>
Nominative	<i>habár-u</i>	<i>fáatt-at</i>
Genitive	<i>habar-í</i>	<i>faatt-á</i>
Dative	<i>habar-ü(ha)</i>	<i>faatt-áa(ha ~ ta)</i>
Ablative	<i>habar-üchch</i>	<i>faatt-áchch</i>
Instrumental/comitative/perlative	<i>habar-ün</i>	<i>faatt-án</i>
Locative	<i>habar-áan</i>	<i>faatt-áan</i>
Oblique/vocative	<i>habár-a</i>	<i>fáatt-a</i>
Predicative (with COP2)	<i>habár-a</i>	<i>fáatt-a</i>

Table 1. Case paradigm of a masculine noun (declension M1 in *-á*) and a feminine noun (declension F1a in *-á-ta*)

Adnominal adjectives, numerals and demonstratives agree with their head noun in case and gender. The case system of adnominals is reduced to three forms: nominative, accusative and oblique. Adjectives fall into five declensions (Treis 2008: 256), of which one is exemplified in Table 2.

Case form	M	F
Accusative	<i>farr-á</i>	<i>farr-áta</i>

<sup>2</sup> Enset (*Ensete ventricosum*) is a food plant cultivated in the highlands of southern Ethiopia.

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)

The oblique form of the adjective signals agreement with a non-nominative, non-accusative head noun; see *tordúm-aa* before the instrumental head noun in (4).

- (4) *Bu'll-í*                    *hogob-úta*                    ***tordúm-aa*** *birr-ín*                    *hir-éenno*  
 enset.flour-M.GEN donkey.load-F.ACC ten-M.OBL birr-M.ICP buy-3HON.IPFV  
 ‘(In the old days) one bought a donkey load of enset flour for (lit. with) 10 (Ethiopian) birr.’ (EK2016-02-23\_003)

An adjective may also function as the head of an NP. As such, it has the same case-marking potential as a noun and is marked for one of the nine nominal cases (Table 1); see, e.g., the adjective in the instrumental-comitative-perlative (ICP) case in (5) and the nominative and accusative adjectives in (6). As NP head, the adjective adopts the gender of the omitted head noun, which is masculine in (5) and (6).

- (5) ***Hüil-ün***                    *hoshsh-ó-o(hu)*  
 bad-M.ICP pass.the.night-3M.PFV.REL-NMZ1.M.NOM  
*hāy-ün*                    *kad-áno*  
 front.leg-M.ICP kick-3M.IPFV  
 [Proverb] ‘The one who has passed the night with a bad one (i.e. in bad company) kicks with the front legs.’ (Alamu & Alamaayyo 2017: 80)<sup>3</sup>

- (6) *Kánn*                    *wud-í*                    ***qoxará***                    *hikkáaph*                    *wud-í*  
 A\_DEM1.M.OBL side-M.GEN strong-M.ACC A\_DEM4.M.OBL side-M.GEN  
***qoxár-u***                    *uujj-ee'-üchch*                    *ís*                    *Leegáam-o-ot*  
 strong-M.NOM make.fall-3M.PFV.REL-ABL 3M.NOM L.-M.OBL-COP3  
 ‘If the strong one (i.e. strong wrestler) of that side takes down the strong one of this side, he is (called) “Leegaamo”.’ (EK2016-02-23\_001)

The feminine adjective *hüil-at* ‘the bad’ in (7) refers to an implicit plural referent – note that two (of three) plurative markers in Kambaata are grammatically feminine (Treis 2014: 115).

- (7) *Wól-it*                    ***hüil-at***                    *iill-ít*                    *ul-tún-ka-'nne*  
 other-F.NOM bad-F.NOM reach-3F.PFV.CVB touch-3F.JUS-NEG3-2PL.OBJ  
 [Blessing:] ‘May other bad (things) not come (and) affect you (PL)!’ (AN2016-02-19\_001)

<sup>3</sup> Stress marks, glosses and translations of all data cited from local Kambaata publications are mine.

Adjectival predicates agree with their subject in gender, are marked for the predicative (PRED) case and combine with the ascriptive-identificational copula *-(h)a(a)* (M.COP2)/ *-ta(a)* (F.COP2), as in (8).

- (8) *Tí*                      *hóol-ch-ut*                      *abbís-s*  
 A\_DEM1.F.NOM    sheep-SGV-F.NOM    exceed-3F.PFV.CVB  
***moos-áan-ch-u-ta***  
 disease-AG-SGV-F.PRED-F.COP2  
 ‘This sheep (F) is very sickly.’ (Saint-Exupéry 2018: 14)

As seen in the glosses of the preceding examples, verbs inflect for aspect, mood, polarity and dependency status. All verbs apart from verbal nouns carry simple or bipartite subject indexes. Direct and indirect objects can be expressed by suffixed pronouns at the right edge of the inflected verb (7).

#### 4. Overview of adjectival derivation and compounding

Kambaata has a large class of basic adjectival lexemes, such as *farr-á(ta)* ‘bad’ (Table 2). All simple, underived adjectival roots in the language have a corresponding inchoative-stative property verb of the same root, i.e. *farr-Case+Gender* [ADJ] ‘bad’ – *farr-Subject+TAM* [v] ‘be(come) bad’. It is still unclear whether one should assume that inchoative-stative verbs are derived from adjectives, or vice versa, through conversion, or that the word class of property concepts is underspecified, allowing for both adjectival and verbal inflection (Treis 2008: 269).

Kambaata also has five productive derivational processes to create adjectives on the basis of nominal, verbal, ideophonic and adjectival roots (Table 3), the first four processes are briefly addressed in this section, the approximative derivation is discussed in detail in the following. All derivational morphology (in bold) is found between the root and the adjectival case/gender inflection; the latter is realised as *-á/-áta*, *ú/-íta*, *-ú/-úta* in the accusative (= citation) masculine/feminine form, depending on the declension of the resulting derived adjective.

Derivation	Morphological structure	Example
Proprietary	Noun- <b>aam</b> -Case+Gender	e.g. <i>orc-á</i> ‘mud’ > <i>orc-aam-ú</i> (M) / <i>-íta</i> (F) ‘muddy’
Agentive	Verb/Noun- <b>aan</b> -Number-Case+Gender	e.g. <i>dimb-</i> ‘be(come) drunk’ > <i>dimb-aan-ch-ú(ta)</i> ‘drunkard’
Resultative	Ideophone- <b>eem</b> -Case+Gender	e.g. <i>dákk=y-</i> ‘be hidden’ > <i>dakk-eem-á(ta)</i> ‘hidden’
Caritive	Noun- <b>beel</b> -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.- <b>lab</b> -Case+Gender	e.g. <i>mux-á(ta)</i> ‘wet’ > <i>mux-(i)lab-á(ta)</i> ‘a bit wet’

Table 3. Productive adjectivizing derivations

Proprietary adjectives attribute to the head noun they modify the property of possessing, being full of, containing or being characterised by N, i.e. the nominal root on which they are based (Treis 2008: 274–277); see, for instance, *buur-ú* ‘butter’ > *buur-aam-ú/-íta* ‘containing butter (e.g. coffee)’ and *fool-í* ‘soul’ > *fool-aam-ú/-íta* ‘soul-having (i.e. living)’ (9). Proprietary adjectives can express a time-stable property, e.g. *maq-aam-ú/íta* ‘strong (lit. having strength)’ < *maq-óo* ‘strength’, or a temporary property, which enables reference to someone (or something) standing out from a group, e.g. a girl who is *boos-aam-íta* ‘water pot-having’ (< *boos-ú* ‘water pot’) is probably accompanied by girls who do not carry a water pot.

Proprietary adjectives take the case-gender markers *-ú* (M.ACC) / *íta* (F.ACC).

(9) *Mann-íi*      *gizz-íi*      *reh-ée=hanníi*  
 people-M.DAT domestic.animal-M.DAT die-3M.PFV.REL=NMZ3.M.DAT

*fool-aam-íi*      *jabá*  
 soul-PROP-M.DAT bless.INTJ

‘Bless (the coffee) for the people, for the domestic animals, for the dead, for the living (lit. soul-having)!’ (AN2016-02-19\_001)

The agentive derivation takes verbal (and to a lesser extent nominal) roots as basis for adjectives expressing ‘who/which V-s; who/which does N’; see, e.g., *mogga’-aan-ch-ú(ta)* ‘who (M/F) steals’ < *mogga’-* [V] ‘steal’ and *zeem-aan-ch-ú(ta)* ‘who (M/F) herds’ < *zeem-áta* [N] ‘herding’. The referents characterised by these agentive adjectives can be habitual/professional agents just as well as occasional/one-off agents (cf. Treis 2011 for other less common meanings of the agentive derivation). The derivational morpheme *-aan* is obligatorily followed by a number marker, either *-ch* SGV or *-n* PLV3, and the case/gender morpheme *-ú* (M.ACC) / *-íta* (F.ACC); cf. (8).

<sup>4</sup> The heart is the seat of the mind in Kambaata.

The resultative derivation takes a simple or reduplicated ideophone as input and conveys that a referent has undergone the process expressed by the ideophone and is therefore now “ideophoned” (Treis 2008: 283–285), e.g. *qonfo ’ll-eem-á(ta)* ‘dented’ < *qonfo ’ll=y-* ‘be(come) dented’ and *luf-luf-eem-á(ta)* ‘soft’ < *lúf-lúf=y-* ‘be(come) soft’. In addition to the 15 examples given in Treis (2008: 283–284), Alemu (2016) contains 38 resultative derivatives as entries or in the monolingual definitions; all *-eem-*derivates are deideophonic.

The caritive morpheme *-beel* generates denominal adjectives with the meaning ‘N-less, not having N’.<sup>5</sup> It either attaches to the nominal root or (with a small number of noun ending in a long vowel) to the genitive form; it is followed by the case/gender markers *-ú* (M.ACC)/*-úta* (F.ACC). In Treis (2008: 277), the caritive derivation was too hastily characterised as “seldom used”, whereas Alemu’s (2016) dictionary shows that it is in fact fairly productively applicable, at least in the written genre. See, for instance, *bonx-beel-ú(ta)* ‘leafless, without leaves’ < *bonx-á* ‘leave(s)’ and *seer-beel-ú(ta)* ‘illegal, without rules’ < *seer-á* ‘rule, law’. However, most caritive adjectives attested in the written corpus are best considered semantically transparent adhoc-creations and the result of the generalization of a hitherto only weakly productive derivational schema. Lexicalised caritives that are not adhoc but widely shared across the speech community are, e.g., *wol-beel-ú(ta)* ‘countless’ < *woll-úta* ‘counting, number’, *wozan-beel-ú(ta)* ‘forgetful (lit. heartless)’ < *wozan-á* ‘heart’, *su ’mm-beel-é* ‘first week of July (lit. nameless)’ < *su ’mm-á* ‘name’, *maq-ee-beel-úta* ‘pregnant (lit. powerless)’ < *maq-ée* (F.GEN) ‘of power’, *hagar-beel-ú(ta)* ‘indescribable, uncategorisable, ugly (lit. typeless)’ < *hagar-á* ‘type’, *man-beel-(ch)-ú(ta)*<sup>6</sup> ‘foreign, without relatives in the area (lit. peopleless)’ < *mann-á* ‘people’. Many of these established caritives are semantically idiosyncratic.

Finally, Kambaata can also create new adjectives through compounding. Compound adjectives are suprasegmentally and inflectionally indistinguishable from derived adjectives; they differ from the latter only in the fact that compounding combines two lexical roots. One prominent and fairly productive type of compound adjective consists of a numeral plus a nominal root, e.g. *mat-* ‘one’ + *ill-íta* ‘eye’ > *mat-ill-á(ta)* ‘one-eyed’ (see Treis 2017a for numerous examples). A second type combines a nominal root with the verbal root *agud-*

<sup>5</sup> In earlier works on Kambaata morphology, the derivation with *-beel* has been called “privative”. To avoid confusion with the use of “privative” in the sense of ‘fake, non-authentic’ in the introduction and other papers in this special issue, I have decided to re-label *-beel* a “caritive” morpheme, in accordance with Oskolskaya (2020) and the research project “Grammatical periphery in the languages of the world: A typological study of caritives” ([www.caritive.org](http://www.caritive.org)).

<sup>6</sup> The *-ch-*morpheme marks the singulative.

‘seem, resemble’,<sup>7</sup> e.g. *bun-agud-á(ta)* ‘coffee-like, coffee-coloured; brown (neolog.)’ (< *bun-á* ‘coffee’), *ann-agud-á(ta)* ‘resembling one’s father’ (Alamu 2022: 24) (< *ann-á* ‘father’) and *am-agud-á(ta)* ‘resembling one’s mother’, an adjective which has given rise to the proper noun *Am-agud-é*<sup>8</sup> for a cow resembling its mother. Finally, a third compound type links two nominal roots. Compounds with the root of the noun *manka* ‘-á’ ‘behaviour, manners’ as second part, as, e.g., in *oos-manka* ‘-á(ta) ‘child-like, young person-like’ (< *oos-úta* ‘children, young persons’), will concern us further in §5.3. All compound adjectives receive the default case/gender markers of the A1 declension: *-á* (M.ACC)/*-áta* (F.ACC).

## 5. Approximative derivation

### 5.1. Morphology

The morphological structure of approximative adjectives is sketched in Figure 1. The derivational morpheme *-lab* is attached to a simple root or a derived stem.

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

Figure 1. Morphological structure of approximative adjectives

If the morpheme is suffixed to roots or stems ending in a consonant cluster, one either observes epenthesis or cluster simplification to avoid an illicit consonant sequence (10); the choice of either strategy is speaker-dependent, sometimes there is even variation in the pronunciation or spelling of one and the same speaker or author.

- (10) *gambal-lab-á(ta)* ~ *gamball-i-lab-á(ta)* ‘blackish’ (< *gamball-á(ta)* ‘black’) (Alamu 2022: 7; Alemu 2016: 812)

Approximative adjectives are categorised into declension A1, marked by *-á* (M)/*-áta* (F) in the accusative (= citation) form. The inputs of the approximate derivation are lexemes of different word classes; compared to other adjectivisers (cf. Table 3), the approximative derivation has the least selection restrictions. In my database, about one third of the inputs are adjectives, verbs and common nouns (Table 4). Inputs from other word classes are only marginally attested; sometimes the word class of the base cannot be unequivocally determined.

<sup>7</sup> In Treis & Deginet (2019: 229), adjectives with *-agud* were erroneously considered to be the result of a similative derivational process.

<sup>8</sup> The case/gender-morpheme *-é* is the accusative morpheme of the largest declension of feminine names (Treis 2008: 103).



- (14) *bull-i-láb-u*                      *bónx-u*                      *yoo-sí*  
grey-EP-APRX-M.NOM leaf-M.NOM COP1.3-3M.OBJ.REL  
*biix-am-ú*                      *sarb-umb-ú*                      *haqq-á*  
break-PASS-M.ACC be.fast-[3M.]NEG5-M.ACC tree-M.ACC  
(Definition of a plant species:) ‘a tree that has greyish leaves and does not break easily’ (Alemu 2016: 759)
- (15) *xabar-láb-ata*    *ball-éen*                      *wójj-u*  
ash-APRX-F.OBL feather-F.LOC white-M.ACC  
*xéf-xéf=y-ee-sé-e (...)*  
spot-spot=say-3M.PFV-3F.OBJ.REL-NMZ1.M.ACC  
(Excerpt of the definition of “guinea fowl”:) ‘white (speckles) are on ash-like feathers (...)’ (Alemu 2016: 1157)

Approximate adjectives can become heads of NPs without further measures (such as nominalisation) being taken; see (16) and further on (37).

- (16) *ang-áta*                      *aa'll-eemmá*                      *zakk-óon*                      *mooshsh-íi*  
hand-F.ACC wash.MID-3HON.PFV.REL after-M.LOC dry.CAUS1-M.DAT  
*dagla'll-eennó*                      *oddish-lab-á*  
use-3HON.IPFV.REL clothes-APRX-M.ACC  
(Definition of “towel”:) ‘a clothes-like (thing) which one uses to dry (one’s) hands after one has washed them’ (Alemu 2016: 319)

In their third syntactic function, as heads of non-verbal predicates, they agree in gender with the overt or retrievable subject and combine with the ascriptive-identificational copula (COP2);<sup>10</sup> the masculine copula *-(h)a(a)* in (17) is determined by the masculine subject ‘father’, the feminine form *-ta(a)* in (11) by the feminine subject ‘work’.

- (17) *Ánn-u*                      *qeraa'rr-i-láb-a-a,*  
father-M.NOM tall-EP-APRX-M.PRED-M.COP2  
*béet-u-s-ma*                      *gabbán-ch-u-a*                      *bagáan*  
son-M.NOM-3M.POSS-CFOC short-SGV-M.PRED-M.COP2 CNTR  
(A says: ‘All family members are short.’ – B corrects him/her:) ‘The father is a bit tall(er) tall, his *son* is short, though.’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

Finally, approximative adjectives can be used as adverbial modifiers. As such, they are invariantly marked for the masculine accusative case. The accusative does not only mark direct objects but also certain adverbial constituents, see, e.g., the simple adjective *qahúnka* ‘(for) a little (while)’ in adverbial function in (22). In (18), the approximative adjective is an adverbial modifier to a subordinate verb (converb). See also (2).

<sup>10</sup> Kambaata has four copulas whose intricate distribution can here not be explained (cf. Treis 2008: chap. 10).



overarching meaning of approximation, understood as deviation from a prototypical realisation.

### 5.3.1. Attenuated property

The first two attestations of approximative forms that occurred in a recording of natural speech are utterances with the colour adjective ‘yellowish’ (21).

- (21) *Baar-lab-áta*      *ík-k*                      *fad-dóo’u*,  
yellow-APRX-F.ACC become-3F.PFV.CVB do.completely-3F.PFV  
*hikkánne-n*  
P\_DEM2.M.OBL-EMP  
‘She (= the chameleon) became yellowish, just there.’ (TD2016-02-11\_001)

Colour terms are among the most frequent bases of *-lab* in written texts, with ‘reddish’ at the top of the list in Table 5.

Colour adjective	Translation	Source
<i>biiishsh-(i)-lab-á(ta)</i>	‘reddish’	(Saint-Exupéry 2018: 19; Alemu 2016: xxvi, 29, 128, 216, 229, 261 307, 225, 842, 844, 1010, 1045)
<i>gamball-(i)-lab-á(ta)</i>	‘blackish’	(Alemu 2016: 464, 812, 868; Alamu 2022: 7)
<i>bull-(i)-lab-á(ta)</i>	‘greyish’	(Alemu 2016: 161, 759, 778)
<i>wojj-(i)-lab-á(ta)</i>	‘whitish’	(Alemu 2016: 160, 1061)
<i>bun-agud-lab-á(ta)</i>	‘brownish’	(Alemu 2016: 163)

Table 5. Attestations of attenuated colour adjectives in written texts

Although colours are the most common adjectival inputs, also other property lexemes undergo the approximative derivation, e.g. ‘wet’ in (22) and ‘poor’ in (24).

- (22) A: *Oddíshsh-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).’  
(Elicited, 3/2018)
- (23) *Āā*,      *gaan-láb-a-ta*,                      *mereer-áan-ch-u-ta*  
yes.INTJ fat-APRX-F.PRED-F.COP2    middle-AG-SGV-F.PRED-F.COP2  
(Context: A asks whether a person is corpulent. – B replies:) ‘Yes, she is somewhat fat, middle(-sized).’ (Elicited, 6/2022)

- (24) *Kám,*                    *bux-ichch-i-láb-a-anka,*  
 INTJ[objection]    poor-SGV-EP-APRX-M.PRED-M.COP2<EMP>  
*áff-ee-si*                    *bors-á*                    *xuud-dáanti-bay?!*  
 seize-3M.PRF-DEF.REL    bag-M.ACC                see-2SG.IPFV-BAY

(Context: A says: ‘He wears a beautiful coat, he must be rich.’ – B replies:) ‘No! He is fairly poor, you see the bag that he carries, don’t you?’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

On a scale from the lowest to the highest degree of a property, deadjectival approximatives cover a vague domain between the two poles. While the *-lab*-derivate in (22) expresses a low degree of wetness, i.e. ‘a bit wet, almost dry’ (see also the recommendation to wait ‘a little’ for it to dry), the rephrase that follows the *-lab*-derivate in (23) shows that the speaker considers the degree of fatness to be in the middle of two body size extremes. Many deadjectival approximatives express a degree that is slightly reduced when compared to the norm, cf. the attenuated colour in (21) is not a full, prototypical yellow, and the person in (24) is not poor but close to being poor. Deadjectival approximatives have been paraphrased, as in (25), with an adverbial *qah-únka* ‘a bit’.

- (25) *Ánn-u*                    *oos-óochchi-s*                    *qah-únka*  
 father-M.NOM    children-F.ABL-3M.POSS    small-M.ACC<EMP>  
*qeráa ’rr-u-a*  
 tall-M.PRED-M.COP2

Solicited periphrasis of (17): ‘The father is a bit taller than his children (= who are all short).’ (Elicited, 6/2022)

Many deadjectival approximatives confirm Alemu’s intuition, as cited in (20), in that they express an attenuated degree of a property. As the position of approximative-marked properties on a scale between non-realisation and prototypical realisation is vague, they are translated, depending on the context, as ‘a bit [PROPERTY], [PROPERTY]-ish, fairly [PROPERTY], almost [PROPERTY]’.

### 5.3.2. *Similarity and near-identity in manner*

In my database, 23 different deverbal adjective types are attested, of which 16 are found in Alemu (2016). A selection of simple and extended verbal stems is presented in (26)-(28). Note that a sequence of a middle and a passive morpheme as in (28) marks the reciprocal (Treis 2022: §4.4).

- (26) *maqees-lab-á* ‘in a kind of forceful way’ < *maqees-* ‘force (tr.)’  
*gis-(i)-lab-á* ‘in a kind of sleeping way’ < *gis-* ‘sleep’  
*uucc-lab-á* ‘in a kind of begging way’ < *uucc-* ‘beg’
- (27) *uucc-aqq-lab-á*  
 beg-MID-APRX-M.ACC  
 ‘almost begging (for one’s benefit)’
- (28) *boroo’rr-am-lab-á*  
 insult<MID>-PASS-APRX-M.ACC  
 ‘almost insulting (and provoking a fight with) each other’

The use of deverbal approximatives in context is illustrated in (29)-(30). The approximative derivation has little influence on the verbal argument structure. Even after having undergone adjectivizing, the verbal base *uucc-aqq-* ‘beg for one’s benefit’ in (29) can still govern an accusative direct object, the tea house boy.<sup>11</sup>

- (29) *Cüil-îi*      *daabb-úta*      *háshsh*      *bors-áan-ta-’*  
 infant-M.DAT bread-F.ACC want.1SG.PFV.CVB bag-M.LOC-L-1SG.POSS
- gizz-á*      *xuujj-oommí=da*      *bácc-o.*  
 money-M.ACC see-1SG.PFV.REL=COND be.absent-3M.PFV
- 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

(Context: Person reports about an incident at the bakery) ‘I wanted to buy bread for the child, but when I looked for money in my bag, there was none. Even though I kind of/almost begged the tea house boy (i.e. the seller), he rejected to give (the bread) to me.’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

- (30) *M-á*      *y-ee=dá-a*      *dag-im-bá’a.*  
 what-M.ACC say-3M.PFV=COND-add know-3M.NIPFV-NEG1
- Gis-i-lab-á*      *ih-áne-et*  
 sleep-EP-APRX-M.ACC become-1SG.IPFV.CVB-COP3
- maccooc-eemmi-ihu*  
 hear-1SG.PRF.REL-NMZ1.M.NOM

(Context: A: ‘What did he say?’ – B:) ‘I don’t know whether he said anything. I heard (something but) I was kind of sleeping.’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

As seen in (29)-(30), deverbal *-lab-*adjectives express an approximate, often near identical manner of doing something, a ‘kind of V-ing’ or an ‘almost (but not quite) V-ing manner’. Whereas deadjectival forms (§5.3.1) convey a vague, more or less reduced degree of a

<sup>11</sup> Deverbal agentive adjectives also continue to govern accusative objects (Treis 2012: 242–243). It is unknown whether deverbal approximative (like agentive) adjectives can also govern adverbial constituents.

property, the relationship between the event expressed by the verbal base vs. the event expressed by the deverbal approximative is a relationship of close similarity or near identity. Deverbal approximatives are approximating in the literal sense, in that they come close to the prototypical realisation of an event. The near realisation of an event expressed by a deverbal approximative is especially evident with achievement verbs such as *ub-* ‘fall’, as in (31) about a near-accident situation.

- (31) *Órc-u shúrr=a’-í-yan-s*  
 mud-M.NOM slip=do-3M.PFV.CVB-DS-3M.OBJ  
*ub-lab-á íkk fanqáll-o*  
 fall-APRX-M.ACC become.3M.PFV.CVB return-3M.PFV  
 ‘The mud made him slip, he almost fell down (but) caught himself.’ (Elicited, 6/2022)

The appropriateness of the translation ‘almost VERB-ing’ is also supported by the periphrasis of (32) in (33). Here a deverbal approximative is paraphrased with the verb *hoog-* ‘miss, not do, fail to realise (here: the mistake)’.

- (32) *Luus-lab-á íkk fanqall-óomm*  
 make.a.mistake-APRX-M.ACC become.1SG.PFV.CVB return-1SG.PFV  
 ‘I almost made a mistake (but then) changed course (lit. returned).’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

- (33) *Lúushsh hóogg dagg-óomm*  
 make.a.mistake.1SG.PFV.CVB miss.1SG.PFV.CVB come.to.know-1SG.PFV  
 Periphrasis of (32): ‘I almost made a mistake (but then) became aware (of it) (lit. I made a mistake, missed, come to know).’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

### 5.3.3. Similarity in quality or character

Denominal approximative adjectives characterise something as ‘similar to/almost like N in quality or character, of the same type’. My database contains 28 different denominal adjective types, of which some are attested several times; see (34)-(35). Denominal approximatives often create ad-hoc categories on the basis of a salient, well-known exponent. The ad-hoc category is then recruited to characterise another, less-known exponent; cf. (34) where the common *weteechchu*-tree is used to create a category of trees with fragrant wood and (35) where a modern-day object introduced in recent times, a towel, is attributed to the adhoc-type of garment-like objects. The adhoc-category creating potential obviously make approximative derivatives useful for monolingual dictionary definitions (cf. Alemu 2016).

- (34) *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)

- (35) *oddishsh-lab-á*  
 clothing-APRX-M.ACC  
 ‘a clothing-like, garment-like (thing)’ (Alemu 2016: 319, used in the definition of a towel)

Denominal approximatives are used as case/gender-agreeing modifiers in the NP in (34) and (36) and as NP heads in (35) and (37). They can equally well be used as predicates or adverbial modifiers.

- (36) *Oot-á*            *al-üichch*    *marf-lab-á*            *ut-ichch-ú*  
 hedge-F.GEN    top-M.ABL    needle-APRX-M.ACC    thorn-SGV-M.ACC  
*áff*                      *wáall-o*  
 seize.3M.PFV.CVB    come-3M.PFV  
 ‘He brought a needle-like thorn from the hedge (e.g. to take out a splinter).’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

- (37) *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 a house/a house-like thing (= not a proper house in the speaker’s mind) in his father’s front yard.’ (Elicited, 3/2018)

Denominal approximatives are paraphrasable by similitive constructions, as two consulted native speakers pointed out (38). Kambaata has an enclitic =*g-* ‘manner; like’ (see Treis 2017b; Treis 2018 for detailed descriptions), which marks, among other, the standard of comparison in similitive and equative constructions.

- (38) *weteechch-í=g-a*                      *yóo*                      *haqqá*  
 tree.sp-M.GEN=SIM-M.ACC/OBL    COP1.REL    tree-M.ACC  
 Periphrasis of (34): ‘a tree which is like the *weteechchu*-tree’ (Elicited, 6/2022)

Denominal approximatives tend to express a similarity in nature, character or function and less so in physical appearance. This observation is captured, for instance, in contrasting pairs such as the (neo-)compound adjective *bun-agud-á(ta)* ‘coffee-coloured’ (< *bun-* ‘coffee’ + *agud-* ‘resemble’) and the approximative adjective *bun-(i)-lab-á* ‘coffee-like’, of which the first form – according to native speaker intuitions – is preferred to characterise the colour of an object, while the second form is preferred to characterise objects that have the same function, significance or way of consumption.

#### 5.3.4. Negative connotations and semantic idiosyncrasies

Even though approximatives can have a negative connotation, as seen in (36) where the speaker belittles somebody's house through the use of *min-lab-á* 'kind of house, house-like (thing)', they most often seem to have a neutral connotation, as the numerous other examples in this contribution show.

The approximative derivation is semantically regular and the meaning of derivational outputs predictable. This stands in contrast to other adjectivizing derivations that display a certain degree of semantic idiosyncrasy – see, for instance, the caritive adjectives and their idiosyncratic translations mentioned in §4. So far only one approximative form is attested in an idiomatic expression, see the denumeral approximative in (39).

- (39) *Xah-á-s*                      *xább=át-t*                      *makk-is-sim-bá'a*,  
thing-M.ACC-DEF do.properly=do-3F.PFV.CVB be.well-CAUS1-3F.NIPFV-NEG  
*mát-u*                      *tordum-láb-a-a=rr-a*  
one-M.NOM ten-APRX-M.OBL-COP2=NMZ4-M.PRED  
(e.g. Speaking about an unordered programme) 'They have not arranged the things (e.g. the talks) properly, everything is a mess (lit. one is ten-like ones).' (Elicited, 3/2018)

One other deverbal approximative is known to have a (slightly) unpredictable figurative meaning, which certainly contributed to it being integrated into the dictionary (Alemu 2016: 1002).

- (40) *Torr-i-lab-á*                      *hírr*                      *waall-óomm*  
throw-EP-APRX-M.ACC sell.1SG.PFV.CVB come-1SG.PFV  
'I sold it very cheap (lit. almost like throwing) and came back (home).' (Elicited, 3/2018)

#### 5.4. Competing strategies

In the preceding sections, periphrases of approximative forms have helped shed light on certain aspects of the meaning of the *-lab-*derivation. In this section, I briefly address near synonyms of approximatives as they are attested in Alemu (2016). In the Kambaata dictionary, compound adjectives of which the second element is the nominal root of *manka'-á* (M) 'humility, behavior, manner(s), norm(s)' sometimes occur in the same contexts or as periphrases of denominal approximatives (§5.3.3). Compare the description of the two birds with ash-coloured feathers in (41) and (42).

- (41) *xabara-manká'-u*      *hagár-u*      *yoo-sé*  
 ash-manner-M.NOM      colour-M.NOM      COP1-3F.OBJ.REL  
*cii'-á*      *sheef-á*  
 bird-F.GEN      species-M.ACC  
 (Definition of *handarchúta* ‘pigeon’:) ‘a bird species of ash-like colour’ (Alemu 2016: 439)
- (42) *xabar-láb-at*      *báall-it*      *yoo-sé*      *zigraa'-í*  
 ash-APRX-F.NOM      feather-F.NOM      COP1-3F.OBJ.REL      guinea.fowl-M.GEN  
*sheef-á*      *íkk*      *gabb-áta*      *ciichch-úta*  
 species-M.ACC      become-3F.PFV.CVB      mid.sized-F.NOM      bird.SG-F.ACC  
 (Definition of *heedoorchúta* ‘partridge’:) ‘a mid-sized bird of the guinea-fowl family with ash-like feathers’ (Alemu 2016: 340)

We also find two dictionary entries of attenuated colours. In the first entry, a *-manka'*-compound is defined by a deadjectival approximative (43); in the other case, a deadjectival approximative is defined by a *-manka'*-compound.

- (43) *baar-manka'-á*      [Definition:] *feeg-á*      *baar-á*  
 yellow-manner-M.ACC      bright-M.ACC      yellow-M.ACC  
*ih-umb-ú;*      *baar-lab-á*  
 become-3M.NEG5-M.ACC      yellow-APRX-M.ACC  
 ‘yellowish’ [Definition:] ‘not being bright yellow, yellowish’ (Alemu 2016: 87)

Alemu (2016) contains altogether 40 *manka'*-compounds, none of which have a verb as first element. The vast majority of the simulative and attenuative *manka'*-compounds are unheard of by my language assistant (Deginet W. Doyiso, pers. comm.); none of them is attested in my own fieldwork data. So it seems likely that *manka'*-compounds only compete with approximatives in certain regiolects or sociolects of Kambaata.<sup>12</sup>

Data in Alemu (2016) also illustrates a strategy that potentially competes with verb-based approximatives. Verbs that combine with an undetermined ending *-xaachch-a* are found to express ‘almost V-ing’ (cf. §5.3.2), e.g. *ub-xaachch-á* ‘almost fall’ (Alemu 2016: 335). However, this particular word formation process and the examples given could not be confirmed either – which leaves the question of competing morphological strategy of the *-lab*-derivation open for future research.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the noun *manka'a* ‘behaviour, norm’ is found in the wordlist in Tadesse’s (2015: 339) Hadiyya grammar – which could mean that *manka'a* is a Hadiyya loanword used in a certain geographical area or by a certain Kambaata speaker group. Until some decades ago, Kambaata was under strong cultural and political influence from Hadiyya, which is reflected, among others, in Hadiyya personal names in today’s oldest generation and in loanwords in certain semantic domains. Hadiyya loanwords are especially common in the Kambaata spoken along the Hadiyya border.



as well as an extension of use, which allowed the *-lab*-derivation to take lexemes of different word classes as its input. The details of this process remain, however, speculative and undocumented.

The compounding process with *agud*- ‘resemble’ is still transparent to modern Kambaata speakers. Interestingly, coinages of colour terms that are *agud*-compounds can serve as the input of the approximative derivation, see (46), which shows that speakers do not consider *agud*- and *-lab* to be functionally equivalent.

- (46) *bun-agud-lab-á*  
coffee-seem-APRX-M.ACC  
‘brownish (lit. coffee-seeming-ish)’ (Alemu 2016: 163)

The contributions assembled in this special issue discuss different source domains for approximative morphology (the reader is invited to consult the introduction to this volume for an overview and references to the individual chapters). I have shown in this section that the diachronic source of the Kambaata approximative morpheme *-lab* goes back to a verb expressing resemblance. Regarding its origin, the Kambaata approximative is thus comparable to other approximative markers that have developed from items expressing resemblance or similarity, such as the Georgian approximative *-savit*, which can be linked to *-vit* ‘like, as’ (Amiridze this volume), the English *-like*-suffix and the German *-ähnlich* and *-gleich*-suffixes (Hüning & Schlücker this volume).

## 7. Summary

The Kambaata approximative derivation is a productive, albeit less frequently attested adjectivising derivational mechanism if compared, for instance, to the very common proprietive and agentive derivation. However, Alemu (2016) makes extensive use of the approximative derivation in the monolingual definitions of the entries in his dictionary, and native speakers are able to spontaneously come up with new examples. The fair degree of productivity of the approximative derivation helped base the analysis in this paper on a total of 84 different derivatives.

The approximative derivation has few (if any) selection restrictions for the base to which it attaches. The outputs of the derivational process are clearly adjectival in nature, as shown by their agreement behaviour. Approximative adjectives belong to the largest adjectival declension. Syntactically, approximatives, just like basic adjectives, can be used as modifiers in the NP, as heads of the NP, in predicative and in adverbial function, irrespective of the word class of their base.

The meaning of the approximative derivation is, to a certain extent, dependent on the word class of its input. With adjectival bases, approximative adjectives express a vague, more or less attenuated degree of a property, deverbal approximatives express a similar, often near-identical realisation of an event, and denominal approximates express a similarity in nature, character or function and create adhoc categories. The meanings are subsumable under an overarching meaning of approximation, understood as deviation from a prototypical realisation. It is unclear whether Kambaata has word formation processes that compete with the approximative derivation – the allegedly synonymous formations attested in Alemu (2016) could not (yet) be confirmed.

The Kambaata approximative morpheme must have emerged – in the recent history of the language – from an independent lexeme, \**lab-* ‘resemble’, which is no longer in use in the language but still found in related Highland East Cushitic language. From a Cushitic perspective, the Kambaata approximative derivation is unique of its kind. No related language has so far been reported to have a grammatical process to express approximation.

## Acknowledgments

[added after review]

## Abbreviations

A_	adjectival
ABL	ablative
ACC	accusative
ADD	additive (‘also’, ‘and’)
AG	agentive
APRX	approximative
BAY	negative rhetorical question
CAUS1	simple causative
CFOC	contrastive focus
CNTR	contrastive
COND	conditional
COP2	ascriptive-identifiational -( <i>h</i> ) <i>a(a)</i> -/ <i>ta(a)</i> -copula
COP3	ascriptive-identifiational <i>Vt</i> -copula
CVB	converb
DAT	dative
DEF	definite
DEM1	proximal demonstrative
DEM2	medial demonstrative
DS	different subject
EMP	emphasis
EP	epenthesis
F	feminine
GEN	genitive
HON	honorific, impersonal
ICP	instrumental-comitative-perlative

IMP	imperative
INTJ	interjection
IPFV	imperfective
JUS	jussive
L	linker
LOC	locative
M	masculine
MID	middle
NEG1	standard negator
NEG3	jussive negator
NEG5	relative negator
NIPFV	non-imperfective
NMZ1	nominaliser -V
NMZ3	nominaliser = <i>hann</i>
NMZ4	nominaliser =r
NOM	nominative
OBJ	object
OBL	oblique
P_	pronominal
PASS	passive
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
PLC	place nominaliser = <i>b</i>
POSS	possessive
PRED	predicative
PRF	perfect
QUAL	quality noun derivation
REL	relative
SG	singular
SGV	singulative

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