



**HAL**  
open science

# Ideophones and verbal constructions with the verb ‘say’ in Amharic

Ronny Meyer

► **To cite this version:**

Ronny Meyer. Ideophones and verbal constructions with the verb ‘say’ in Amharic. *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads*, 2024, Ideophones: honing in on a descriptive and typological concept, 4 (1), pp.201-243. 10.6092/issn.2785-0943/16466 . hal-04611751

**HAL Id: hal-04611751**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04611751v1>**

Submitted on 13 Jun 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Ideophones and verbal constructions with the verb ‘say’ in Amharic

RONNY MEYER

INALCO & CNRS, UMR 8135 LANGAGE, LANGUES ET CULTURES D’AFRIQUE

Submitted: 16/02/2023 Revised version: 7/02/2024

Accepted: 8/02/2024 Published: 12/06/2024



Articles are published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (The authors remain the copyright holders and grant third parties the right to use, reproduce, and share the article).

## Abstract

Amharic (Ethiosemitic) has verbal predicates of two types: (i) verbs derived from a consonantal root and (ii) complex predicates consisting of an invariant coverb followed by an inflecting light verb, most commonly the verb *alä* ‘say’. Although complex predicates have been discussed in several descriptions of Amharic, little attention has been paid to the different word classes that occur as coverbs and the differences in their morphosyntactic behavior. This is also true for ideophones, which are often mentioned in the discussion of complex predicates, but without stating whether they form a distinct lexical class in Amharic and how this class can be characterized. This article describes the various elements that function as coverbs in complex predicates and provides a language-internal morphosyntactic definition of ideophones as a word class in Amharic. It is argued that only an ideophonic coverb can form noncausal/causal complex predicate pairs with the light verbs *alä* ‘say’ and *adärrägä* ‘do’. In addition to basic ideophonic lexemes, Amharic can also derive ideophones from verbal roots through dedicated templates expressing intensification or attenuation of the event denoted by the root. Amharic ideophones rarely occur on their own, but are typically morphosyntactically integrated by light verbs. Finally, a comparison of different types of coverbs in Amharic with those in other Ethiosemitic languages shows that the languages that are geographically close to or in close contact with Amharic have a similarly large variety of coverbs, while the Ethiosemitic languages that are further away have a more limited inventory.

**Keywords:** Amharic; Ethiosemitic; complex predicates; coverb; verb ‘say’; ideophone

## 1. Introduction

Amharic (amh; Afroasiatic, Semitic)<sup>1</sup> is an Ethiosemitic language and a lingua franca of Ethiopia, a country with an estimated population of 110 million inhabitants in 2018. Ethiopia has over 80 languages belonging to two traditional language phyla: Afroasiatic which includes various Cushitic, Semitic and Omotic languages, and Nilo-Saharan (see Eberhard et al. 2022: 7). Approximately 57 million people speak Amharic in Ethiopia, with 25 million being second language speakers (Eberhard et al. 2022: 13). The language is native to the Amhara Regional State in northern Ethiopia, as well as to the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa and many other cities throughout the country. Due to its extensive use in primary education and as the working language of the Ethiopian government, Amharic has spread beyond its native-speaking region (see Meyer 2011a). The language is relatively well described, with its first grammar and dictionary dating back to 1698 (Ludolf 1698a; 1698b). It has a rich literary tradition, particularly since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Meyer 2011b: 1178–1180).

Amharic and over ten other languages constitute the Ethiosemitic branch within the Semitic language family, which belongs to the Afroasiatic language phylum (see Huehnergard & Pat-El 2019: 3–4; Hudson 2013: 6–36). Hetzron (1972: 119; 1977: 15–24) classifies the Ethiosemitic languages into three major groups, as shown in Figure 1 with minor modifications (for critical points regarding this classification, see Meyer 2018: 94–95).

### North Ethiosemitic

†Geez (gez), Tigre (tig), Tigrinya (tir), Dahaalik (dlk)

### Transversal Ethiosemitic

- a. Amharic (amh), Argobba (agj)
- b. Harari (har),  
East Gurage [EG]: Zay (zwa), Wolane (wle), Silt’e (stv)

### South Ethiosemitic

- a. †Gafat (gft)

---

<sup>1</sup> The languages cited are classified genealogically according to Glottolog and marked with their ISO-code 639-3 upon first mention.

- b. Gunnän Gurage [GG]
  - i. Northern Gurage: Muher (sgw), Kistane (gru), Dobbi (gru)
  - ii. Mesqan (mvz)
  - iii. Chaha group: Chaha, Gumer, Ezha, Gura (all sgw)
  - iv. Inor group: Inor, Enär, Gyeta, Endegagn (all ior),  
†Mesmes (mys)

Figure 1: Major branches of Ethiosemitic (Afroasiatic, Semitic)

The geographical distribution of the Ethiosemitic languages is shown in Figure 2.

As for the general typological profile, the common constituent order is S(ubject)–O(bject)–V(erb), head nouns always follow their modifiers, but case relators may precede, follow, or enclose their complement. Amharic is a nominative–accusative language in which only the accusative is marked obligatorily on definite nouns (1b), whereas indefinite nouns as primary object are most typically unmarked (1a). Verbs obligatorily index their subject and may optionally also index the primary object (1b), or an applied object (1c).<sup>2</sup> Differential object marking is common.

- (1) a. *almaz mäkina fät'-ättf*  
 Almaz.F car sell\PFV-SBJ.3SF  
 'Almaz sold a car.'
- b. *almaz mäkina-w-n fät'-ättf(-iw)*  
 Almaz.F car-DEF.M/POSS.3SM sell\PFV-SBJ.3SF(-OBJ.3SM)  
 'Almaz sold the/his car.'
- c. *tilant mäkina-w-n fät'-ättf-ibb-ijñ*  
 yesterday car-DEF.M/POSS.3SM sell\PFV-SBJ.3SF(-MIL-OBJ.3SM)  
 'Yesterday, she sold the/his car to my detriment.'

<sup>2</sup> The Amharic data is transcribed and transliterated with IPA symbols, except for the open-mid central vowel, which is represented by *ä*.

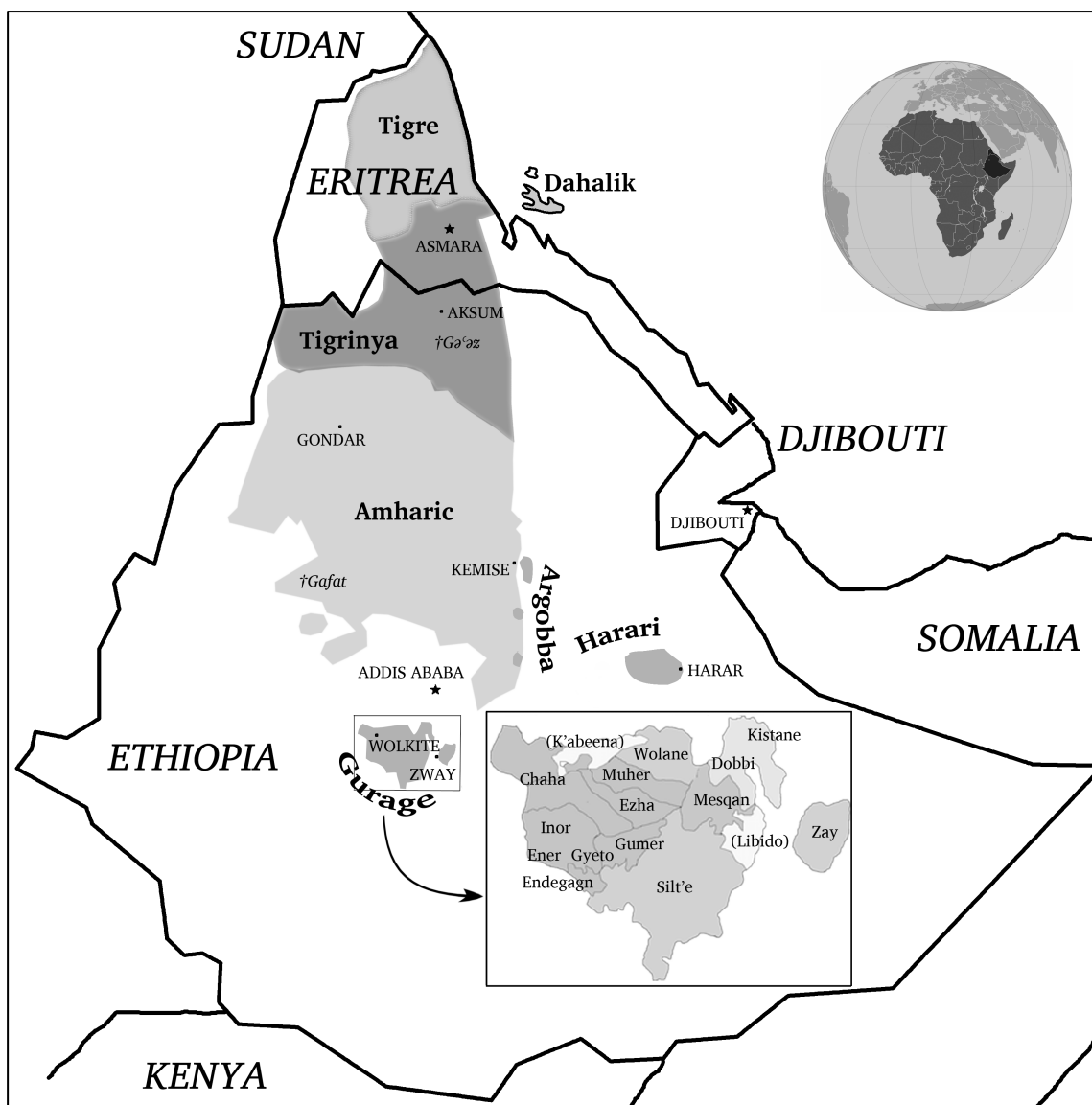


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of Ethiosemitic languages  
(taken from Meyer 2016a: 162).

The position of adverbs and adverbials is flexible. Time adverbs usually occur sentence initially, as in (1c), but they can also follow an overt subject noun or immediately precede the verb. Furthermore, adverbs can be marked for definiteness and accusative case to emphasize them, as the second occurrence of *zare* 'today' in (2).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The data quoted from *written* Amharic sources is given in the Amharic script (for which see Meyer 2016b) and in transliteration, whereas the data from oral sources are only presented in transcription.

(2) Source: Twitter<sup>4</sup>

ሸክ	ያለውን	ዛፍ	ዛሬ	ተከላችሁ
<i>fok</i>	<i>j-allä-w-n</i>	<i>zaf</i>	<i>zare</i>	<i>täklattfih<sup>w</sup></i>
thorn	REL-exist:NPST.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SM-ACC	tree	today	plant\CNV.2PL
ዛሬውን	ብትነኩት			
<i>zare-w-n</i>	<i>bi-tti-näku-t</i>			
<b>today-DEF.M-ACC</b>	<b>CND-SBJ.2PL-touch\PL-OBJ.3SM</b>			
አይወጋችሁም።				
<i>a-j-wäga-attfihu-mm.</i>				
	NEG-SBJ.3SM-pierce\IPFV-OBJ.2PL-NEG			

‘(If) you plant a tree with thorns [lit. a tree to which exist thorns] today and touch it the same day [lit. the today], it will not hurt [lit. pierce] you.’

Simple nouns can also become adverbs, but are then usually followed by a definite marker and the accusative suffix *-n*, as in the noun *ginbar* ‘forehead’ (15a).

As in other Semitic languages, verbs are formed through non-linear morphology by interdigitating a grammatical template with a lexical root. In other word classes (e.g. nouns, pronouns, interjections), fully vocalized stems predominate (for further details see, among others, Meyer 2011b; 2016c: 181–183; Edzard 2019; Mengistu 2023).

In verb inflection, Amharic has four primary conjugations, which are shown for the root √ s-b-r ‘break’ and the 3SM subject index in Table 1.

Conjugation	Template	Base	Index	Verb	
Perfective	C <sub>1</sub> äCC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub>	*säbbär	-ä	säbbärä	‘he broke’
Imperfective	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub>	*säbr	j-	jisäbir	‘he breaks’ (dependent)
Imperative	C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub>	*sbär	j-	jisbär	‘he should break’
Converb	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> ä	*säbrä	-u	säbro	‘he breaking’ (dependent)

Table 1: Primary conjugations in Amharic.

The perfective and the imperfective encode two different viewpoint aspects, while the imperative is a mood expressing a command or request for the first, second and third persons. The fourth conjugation represents the converb (for details, see Meyer 2012).

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/natnaelmekonne7/status/1378704197667991557>, 07/01/2024

All four conjugations consist of a grammatical template and affixed person indexes that cross-reference the subject. The perfective and the converb index their subject with two different sets of suffixes, while the imperfective and the imperative use almost the same set consisting of prefixes and suffixes (see, e.g., Edzard 2019: 213). The pattern of the templates depends on the number of root consonants and the verb type (for further details, see Meyer 2011b: 1192–1193), i.e. the patterns in Table 1 are only valid for trilateral roots of Type A. Primary and applied objects can be indexed by a special suffix set, whereas the applied object index is preceded either by the malefactive/instrumental/locative (MIL) suffix *-bb*, as in (1c), or the benefactive suffix *-ll*. The imperfective verb is a dependent form which combines either with prefixes marking various types of subordinate clauses or with an auxiliary in affirmative main clauses. The converb, a verb form that cannot be negated, either marks a dependent clause or combines with a temporal auxiliary to form the perfect in main clauses. The most common auxiliaries are the cliticized existential verb = *all(ä)* for the nonpast and *näbbär* for the past. Negation is marked by the prefix *a(l)-* attached to the inflected verb and, in main clauses, additionally by the focus marker *-mm*, as in (2) (see Girma & Meyer 2008).

Amharic has a large number of ideophones (Goldenberg 2013: 223-224; Wetter 2003; 1999; Crass et al. 2001), but they have not received much attention in grammars. Amharic ideophones are morphologically invariant elements that usually occur only in combination with other morphemes. Most often, they are followed by the inflected verb ‘say’ with which they form a composite verb, such as the ideophone *t’äbb* ‘drop’ in (3).

(3) Source: Youtube<sup>5</sup>

ማር	ጠብ	ይላል፤	ካፍሽ።
<i>mar</i>	<i>t’äbb</i>	<i>ji-l = all</i>	<i>kaf-ij</i>
honey	IDPH.drop	3SM-say\IPFV = AUX.NPST	from.mouth-POSS.2SF
‘Honey drops from your mouth.’			

Following Mengistu (2010), I consider the composite verbs like *t’äbb jilall* ‘it drops’ in (3) to be complex predicates which consist of an invariant element, called coverb, which provides the lexical semantics and which is followed by a light verb that hosts

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0r9ZyBFA5U>, 17/12/2023

the grammatical information. In (3), the coverb is the ideophone *t'äbb*, but other elements may also function as coverbs in Amharic, as will be shown in Section 4. The light verb is the verb *alä* 'say'<sup>6</sup> in the imperfective aspect marked with a 3SM subject. In complex predicates, the light verb has lost most of its original lexical semantic content and become an element that primarily encodes grammatical functions. Besides *alä*, there are a number of other light verbs in Amharic (see Section 4). Additional examples of ideophones with the light verb *alä* 'say' and the semantic fields they cover are shown in (4), which is based on Wetter (2003: 261–262).

(4) **Ideophones originating from imitative sound symbolism**

(= **onomatopoeia**)

- a. *t'wa*     *alä* 'pop, explode'
- b. *k'wa*     *alä* 'snap, click'
- c. *fiww*     *alä* 'whiz, swish, hiss'

**Ideophones originating from synesthetic sound symbolism**

(**depicting perceptible sensory imagery**)

- d. *billitt'*   *alä* 'flash, sparkle, glitter'
- e. *bikk'*     *alä* 'pop in, appear suddenly'
- f. *zimm*     *alä* 'be quiet'

**Ideophones originating from conventional sound symbolism**

(**depicting abstract concepts**)

- g. *zikk'*     *alä* 'be low/inferior'
- h. *k'äss*     *alä* 'be slow'
- i. *däss*     *alä* 'be pleasing'

Apart from Wetter (2003), the existing literature on Amharic has generally taken the complex predicate with 'say', with all its different coverbs, as a point of departure for analysis (Section 2).

In this paper, I will argue that Amharic ideophones form a distinct word class in Amharic that can be defined on language-internal morphosyntactic grounds. After a brief overview of the history of research on Amharic composite verbs with 'say' and related constructions (Section 2), I will discuss criteria that can be used to define

---

<sup>6</sup> As is common practice in the description of Semitic languages, the citation form of a verb is the 3SM perfective and not the infinitive/verbal noun.



ideophones as a word class in Amharic, which are typically realized as coverbs in a complex predicate (Section 3). Then I will discuss other coverbs that do not belong to the class of ideophones (Section 4). In addition to basic or simple ideophones, Amharic also has reduplicated ideophones and ideophones derived from a lexical root by templates, which are described in Section 5 and Section 6, respectively. To provide a broader picture of the distribution of complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ in Ethiosemitic languages, a comparative overview is presented in Section 7. A summary of the paper and the conclusions are given in Section 8.

The Amharic data in this paper comes from a convenience corpus consisting of various printed sources, primarily Leslau’s (1995) *Reference Grammar of Amharic*, my own observations of spoken Amharic over the past twenty years and targeted online searches. References have been provided for data cited from published sources and the Internet; unreferenced data are from observation. All data has been cross-checked with native speakers of Amharic (see Acknowledgements).

## 2. Research history

This section presents an overview of how complex predicates with ‘say’, which include ideophones, have been addressed in descriptions of Amharic over time.

The first Amharic grammar, Ludolf (1698a: 32), mentions a complex predicate with an ideophonic coverb, namely ገም ብኣሉኛ *zimm bi?aläh*<sup>w</sup> [sic!] (today *zimm al-k*<sup>w</sup> IDPH.silent say\PFV-1SG)<sup>7</sup> ‘I am silent’, without further explanation. In later grammars, the invariant coverb is usually treated as a particle or interjection combined with the verb *alä* ‘say’, or with the verbs *assäjñä* ‘feel to do; sense; name’, *täsäjñä* ‘be named’ or *adärrägä* ‘do, make’ (e.g. Isenberg 1842: 148–149; Praetorius 1879: 275–276; Armbruster 1908: 147).<sup>8</sup> A summary of early descriptions of these complex predicates can be found in Cohen (1939: 286–301). After an extensive list of examples, Cohen concludes that the coverb in these complex predicates is typically a “descriptive interjection” and proposes the term “composite descriptive verbs” to refer to them (Cohen 1939: 287). In post-World War II Amharic grammars, constructions with the verb ‘say’ have been called “composite verbs”, especially by Leslau (e.g. 1945a; 1995) and Appleyard (2001), but also by terms like “compound verbs” (e.g. Hetzron 1972:

<sup>7</sup> Note that the current form of the verb *alä* ‘say’ is historically related to the root b-h-l (see, e.g. Baye 1999) on which Ludolf’s expression is based.

<sup>8</sup> At least one Amharic grammar, Titov (1976), does not explicitly mention these constructions.

18; Baye 1999), which probably were then translated into Amharic as ጥምር ግሶች *t'immir gissottf* (lit. 'coalition verbs') (Baye 2008: 224–229), or “phrasal verbs” with the verb ‘say’ being a “supporting verb” (Meyer 2009: 27, see also Treis this volume for the Cushitic language Kambaata). Anbessa & Hudson (2007: 74–75) call these complex predicates “say verbs”.

Täklä Maryam (1964EC: 47), an early Amharic school grammar, considers the verb ‘say’ in complex predicates as an auxiliary that transforms nonverbal elements into verbs. This grammaticalization process is also assumed by Crass et al. (2001) and Wetter (1999). Mengistu (2010), whose terminology I have adopted in this paper, analyzes the verb *alä* ‘say’ and its causal counterpart *adärrägä* ‘do’ in complex predicates as “light verbs” and the preceding element as “coverb”. Note, however, that the term “coverb” is not limited to ideophones, but also includes other elements such as reported clauses, interjections, adverbials, simple nouns, reduplicated nouns and imperatives (see the examples in (14)).

The most comprehensive collection and detailed description of Amharic complex predicates with the verb *alä* ‘say’ and their coverbs can be found in Leslau (1995: 580–596). Baye (1999: 32–34) provides a semantic classification of all types of complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ in Amharic and thus implicitly also for ideophones. Based on the semantics and phonetic form of the coverb, he distinguishes between complex predicates for movement, silence, facial expressions, taste, rejection and onomatopoeic expressions.

Wetter (1999; and later 2002; 2003) was the first to use the term “ideophone” for the invariant coverb (i.e. non-reported element) in Amharic complex predicates with the verb ‘say’. In particular, Wetter (2003) elaborates on the concept of ideophone and identifies three types in Amharic, see (4), based on their degree of conventionalization by mapping their sound symbolic structure onto sensory imagery. Later, the term “ideophone” was also used in other work on Amharic, e.g. Zelealem (2011) and Meyer (2011b). The most recent publications on this topic are Teferi & Baye (2022a; 2022b), who present the preliminary results of an ongoing PhD study on Amharic ideophones and other elements occurring as coverb in constructions with the verb ‘say’ as well as various morphological and syntactic processes related to them.

In a broader context for Ethiopian languages in general, Appleyard (2001) proposes a form-oriented classification of complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ based on the morphological structure of the coverbs. He makes a very useful distinction between

lexical non-derived ideophones, quoted particles (mainly nouns and interjections), and coverbs derived from an existing verb root.

However, all these studies simply assume that some elements in combination with the verb 'say' should be considered as ideophones without providing a clear definition of what an ideophone actually is in Amharic or in other Ethiosemitic languages.

### 3. On the definition of ideophones in Amharic

Dingemanse (2012: 655) defines ideophones semantically as “marked words that depict sensory imagery”, which he proposes as a comparative concept for linguistic typology (for an overview on research on ideophones, see Dingemanse 2018). Morphologically and morphosyntactically, ideophones are usually determined by language-specific criteria, since common features that could universally define them have not yet been found (Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001: 2; Kilian-Hatz 2020: 696). However, ideophones share a number of common tendencies (see Kilian-Hatz 2020 for details): They are usually sound-symbolic content-words with a language-specific semantics; they may exhibit phonological features not found in other word classes of the respective language; they are morphologically invariant and syntactically free; and they are preferably found in quotative constructions and used in informal speech situations.

In the following, it will be shown how these general phonological, morphological, morphosyntactic and semantic criteria apply to Amharic ideophones. The text extract in (5) illustrates the use of complex predicates with an ideophone as coverb in colloquial speech; the ideophones and their light verbs are given in bold.

#### (5) Source<sup>9</sup>

[Context: Several guests sit in a cafe bar drinking coffee and reading newspapers. Suddenly one of the guests jumps up frantically and starts searching for his cell phone. As he cannot find it, he accuses the waiter and other guests of theft. Eventually, the waiter asks him to pay the bill...]

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sewasew.com/p/ፈታኛ፣ 17/01/2022>

- a. [...] የሂሳብ ደረሰኝ የመጣበትን ትንሽቶ  
*jä-hisab dāräsājn jä-mätt’a-bb-ät-in tinnif-ijje*  
 LNK-bill receipt LNK-come\PFV.SBJ.3SM-MIL-OBJ.3SM-ACC small-DIM  
 አቃፊ ነገር ብድግ ሲያደርገው —  
*ak’afi nägär biddigg s-j-adärg-äw*  
 holding thing IDPH.rise\_suddenly when-SBJ.3SM-do\IPFV-OBJ.3SM  
 ‘When he suddenly took up the rather small folder in which the bill came –’

- b. ከው!! እፍር!! ሽምቅቅ!!  
*kiww iffirr fimk’ikk’*  
 IDPH.very\_scared IDPH.very\_ashamed IDPH.be\_folded\_up  
 እንደው መግቢያ ጥፍት!!  
*indäw mägbija t’iffitt*  
 even entrance IDPH.absence  
 ‘He got frightened! He got ashamed! He pulled (his arms) over (his chest)! He did not know where to disappear!’

- c. «ምድር ዋጪኝ፤ ሰማይ ተከደንብኝ»  
*midir watf’i-jn sämaj tākädän-ibbi-jn*  
 earth swallow\IMP.SBJ.2SF-OBJ.1SG heaven cover\_up\IMP.SBJ.2SM-MIL-OBJ.1SG  
 አይነት ነገር፤  
*ajnät nägär*  
 kind thing  
 ‘(He was thinking) Something like “(Oh) earth swallow me, (oh) heaven cover me up” –’

- d. ሞባይሉ ቶብ አላለም!!  
*mobajl-u dubb al-al-ä-mm!*  
 cell\_phone-POSS.3SM IDPH.appear\_suddenly NEG-say\PFV-3SM-NEG  
 ‘(and then was it not that) his cell phone suddenly appeared (in front of him).’

The typical use of ideophones is illustrated in (5a) and (5d), where *biddigg* ‘rise suddenly’<sup>10</sup> and *dubb* ‘appear suddenly’ form a complex predicate with the verbs *alä*

<sup>10</sup> The word-middle consonant of some ideophones is optionally geminated or single, e.g. *biddigg* (Leslau 1995: 585) vs. *bidigg* (Kane 1990: 938) ‘rise suddenly’ (see also Cohen 1939: 288).

‘say’ and *adärrägä* ‘do’ as light verbs (see Section 4 below). The independent use of ideophones without a light verb is rare, but may occur in emphasized discourse (5b), in child-oriented speech, as in the extract from a children’s song in (6) and the riddle in (7), or in second-person imperatives (see e.g. Mengistu 2010: 299 fn. 4).

(6) Source: Youtube<sup>11</sup>

a. *wiha-ye-n*                      *t’it’ t’itt~t’it’ t’itt.*

water-POSS.1SG-ACC IDPH.drink~PLR

‘(I) drink up my (glass of) water.’

b. *k’urs-e-n-imm*                      *bil’litt~bil’litt.*

breakfast-POSS.1SG-ACC-FOC IDPH.eat~PLR

‘And (I) also eat up my breakfast.’

(7) *liḡ-itwa*    *bikk’*    *t’il’likk’;*

child-DEF.F IDPH.pop IDPH.plunge

*inat-jä-wa*                      *k’oma*                      *dür’rikk’.*

mother-SNG-DEF/POSS.3SF stand\CNV.3SF IDPH.dry/insist

‘The child is [steadily] appearing and disappearing; her mother insists on standing still.’ [answer: pestle and mortar]

Although Amharic prosody is not yet well-studied, it is generally assumed that the last syllable of a polysyllabic word is not accented (Alemayehu 1987: 24, 29–31, 37; and also Leslau 1995: 44–45). For polysyllabic ideophones, on the other hand, it seems that the final syllable typically bears the accent, as shown by the symbol ‘ in (6) and (7). This observation still needs to be verified by further studies.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to their segmental phonemic structure and phonotactics, the majority of ideophones do not differ from other Amharic words. Only two ideophones—*ḡiḡiḡi alä* ‘buzz, hum’ and *ḡaw alä* ‘meow’<sup>13</sup> (Kane 1990: 1089)—begin with the palatal nasal, which usually does not occur word-initially in Amharic. The final consonant of an ideophone tends to be geminated. Word-final gemination, however, is not a

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWyUIR0rpVY>, 17/01/2022

<sup>12</sup> Ideophones in the Bantu language Sena (seh) are also characterized by a different prosodic behavior vis-à-vis other word classes (see Guérois this volume).

<sup>13</sup> Or also *mijaw alä* (Kane 1990: 319) with a different initial nasal.

phonotactic peculiarity of ideophones and is also found with nouns (8) and verbs (9), as well as other word classes, e.g. the interjections *ettf* ‘ugh (expression of disgust)’ and *goff* ‘bravo’ (Leslau 1995: 907, 909), and bound morphemes such as the *-jn* POSS.1SG, *-ättf* 3SF subject index on perfective verbs.

(8) Leslau (1995: 12–13)

- a. *nättf* ‘white’ vs. *nättf* ‘one who plucks’  
b. *giff* ‘stripped’ vs. *gif* ‘wrong, injustice’  
c. *wätt* ‘solid, homogenous’ vs. *wät* ‘stew’

- (9) a. *t’iru-nna mät’fo säw-ottf-in läjj!*  
good-and bad person-PL-ACC separate\IMP.2SM  
‘Distinguish between good and bad people!’  
b. *wiha-w jī-fäss näbbär.*  
water-DEF.M 3SM-spill\IPFV AUX.PST  
‘The water was spilling over.’

It is instead a few interjections, not ideophones, that contain unusual sounds, as the paralinguistic clicks in (10), or the interjection *ärä* ‘really! (expressing surprise)’, the only word starting with the vowel *ä*.

(10) **Interjections with para-linguistic click consonants**

- a. Labial click  $(m)⊙^w$  (imitating a kissing sound)  
b. Alveolar click  $!!!$  (showing regret)  
c. Lateral click  $///$  (driving horses)  
d. Uvular click  $ʘʘʘ$  (calling chicken)

The interjections with the click consonants in (10) are usually not mentioned in Amharic grammars and dictionaries (e.g. Leslau 1995: 899–909), probably because they are exclusively found in spoken language, and the Ethiopian script does not have graphemes to write them.

Although many ideophones in Amharic seem to be of onomatopoeic origin or to represent some kind of sound symbolism, e.g. *t’äbb* ‘drip’, *tʃ’ill~tʃ’ill* ‘tinkle’, *koff~koff*

‘rustle’ (Zelealem 2011: 3, 28, 31),<sup>14</sup> Amharic also has a number of regular nouns and verbs with an onomatopoeic sound pattern, as in (11).

(11) **Onomatopoeia**

<b>Noun</b>	<b>Verb</b>
a. Kane (1990: 1771, 1772) <i>dok’dokk’e</i> ‘motorbike’	<i>tändäk’äddäk’ä</i> ‘make a putt-putting sound’
b. Kane (1990: 2241) <i>tf’atf’ut</i> ‘chick’	<i>täntf’attf’a</i> ‘twitter’
c. Kane (1990: 1448) <i>kukkulu</i> (cock’s crow)	<i>kokkolä</i> ‘crow’

Consequently, an onomatopoeic sound pattern is not an appropriate criterion for defining an ideophone. Similarly, reduplication, which is often found in ideophones to express some kind of distributive meaning (see Section 5), also occurs in interjections, nouns, verbs, adverbs, etc.

Many ideophones can be nominalized by the suffix *-ta*, e.g. *billittf* (ideophone for flash, sparkle, glitter) > *billittf-ita* ‘flicker (n), glimmer (n)’, *zikk’* (ideophone for being low) > *zikk’-ita* ‘lowness’, *zimm* (ideophone for being quiet) > *zimm-ita* ‘silence’. However, as the nominalization does not apply to all ideophones and also occurs with interjections, e.g. *imbi-ta* ‘refusal’ (< *imbi* ‘no emphatic!’), *inde-ta* ‘certainly, of course’ (< *inde* ‘what!, how!’ expressing surprise), it cannot be considered a defining feature of the word class of ideophones.

Ideophones without a light verb appear obligatorily in the clause-final verbal slot, e.g. (6), or immediately preceding the light verb in complex predicates, as in (5a) and (5d). Their syntactic position is not flexible. Although ideophones without a light verb lack morphological person and TAM markers, they govern objects marked for the accusative case by the suffix *-n* (6) and can be modified by a converb (7). Thus, Amharic ideophones share syntactic features with verbs, not with nouns.

To recapitulate the main points: The ideophones formed by sound-symbolic imitation, e.g. (4a), are onomatopoeia, but not all onomatopoeia are ideophones. There is no phonetic or phonological feature that clearly separates them from

<sup>14</sup> Zelealem (2011) has a very broad concept of onomatopoeia. For example, he associates smallness with the vowel *i* and bigness with all non-front vowels, e.g. *t’ik’it* ‘little (few)’ vs. *bizu* ‘many’ (Zelealem 2011: 5), or the meaning of ‘sucking’ and ‘absorbing’ with the syllables *t’V* and *mVt’*, as in *t’äbba* ‘suck’ or *mätt’ät’ä* ‘suck up, absorb’ (Zelealem 2011: 11).

members of other word classes – apart maybe from an unusual word-final accent, which, however, needs further investigation. Ideophones share their obligatory clause-final position and their ability to govern direct objects with verbs, and their morphologically simple and invariant form with interjections. Moreover, interjections also occur in constructions with the verb ‘say’ (12a). In some of these constructions, the verb ‘say’ has grammaticalized into a light verb resulting in a complex predicate with a more abstract meaning, as in (12b), where the verb *alä* is no longer used to mark a direct quotation, but has become a light verb hosting grammatical information (see especially Wetter 2002).

(12) Wetter (2002: 1833)

- a. *kasa* « *imbi* » *al-ä*.  
 Kasa.M INTJ.no say\PFV]  
 ‘Kasa said, “no”.’
- b. *rädijo imbi al-ä*.  
 radio INTJ.no say\PFV-3SM  
 ‘The radio doesn’t work (lit. said “no”).’

In fact, most previous studies have treated all complex predicates based on the verb ‘say’ together, regardless of whether their coverb is an ideophone (4), an interjection (12) or some other element (see example (14) in Section 4). However, in these complex predicates, only ideophones, but not interjections or other elements as coverb, productively occur in noncausal/causal pairs with the light verbs ‘say’ and *adärrägä* ‘do’, respectively, as shown in (13). See also Cohen et al. (2002: 245).

(13) **Complex predicates with an ideophone as coverb**

	Noncausal		Causal	
a.	<i>t<sup>w</sup>a alä</i>	‘pop, explode’	<i>t<sup>w</sup>a adärrägä</i>	‘cause to pop’
b.	<i>billittf’ alä</i>	‘flash, glitter’	<i>billittf’ adärrägä</i>	‘cause to glitter, enlighten’
c.	<i>zikk’ alä</i>	‘be low/inferior’	<i>zikk’ adärrägä</i>	‘demote, degrade’

**‘say’ constructions with an interjection as coverb**

	Noncausal		Causal
d.	<i>imbi alä</i>	‘refuse’	* <i>imbi adärrägä</i>
e.	<i>mijaw alä</i>	‘meow’	* <i>mijaw adärrägä</i>
f.	<i>nijnj alä</i>	‘buzz, hum’	* <i>nijnj adärrägä</i>



In contrast to ideophones, interjections and other elements as coverb in (13) only cooccur with the verb ‘say’. While ideophones clearly differ from verbs and nouns in that they are morphologically invariant, the distinction between interjections and ideophones is akin to a grey zone in which the boundary between the two word-classes is not easily drawn, as in (12).

Based on these two features—typical occurrence as coverb and manifestation in a paired construction with the light verbs *alä* ‘say’ (noncausal) and *adärrägä* ‘do’ (causal)—ideophones can be considered a separate word class in Amharic. This word class differs from other Amharic word classes in that its members do not usually appear alone, but typically in combination with a light verb.

#### 4. The verb ‘say’ in combination with various coverbs

Constructions consisting of a coverb and the verb *alä* ‘say’ are very common in Amharic. The coverb can be made up of various elements: a quotation (14), a pseudo-quotation (14b), an ideophone (14c–d), a noun (14e–g),<sup>15</sup> a reduplicated imperative verb (14h)<sup>16</sup> and probably other elements (see also Goldenberg 2013):

- (14) a. « *nägä*      *addis abäbä*    *i-hed = allä-h<sup>w</sup>* »  
 tomorrow    Addis\_Ababa    1SG-go\IPFV = AUX.NPST-1SG  
*al-ä-jjñ.*  
 say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
 ‘He said to me, “I will go to Addis Ababa tomorrow.”’
- b. *bär-u*            « *ali-kkäffät* »            *al-ä-jjñ.*  
 door-DEF.M    NEG-1SG.be\_open\IPFV    say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
 ‘I could not open the door (lit. the door said to me, “I won’t open”).’
- c. *bär-u*            *g<sup>w</sup>a*            *blo*            *täzägga.*  
 door-DEF.M    IDPH.crash    say\CNV.3SM    be\_closed\PFV.3SM  
 ‘The door slammed shut.’

<sup>15</sup> For fully reduplicated nouns as coverb, see Section 6.

<sup>16</sup> Coverbs consisting of reduplicated imperative verbs occur invariably with a 2SM subject and typically describe an imagined action. This construction is only very rudimentarily described for Amharic and not found in the grammars of other Ethiosemitic languages.

- d. *mämt'at-u(-n)*                      *bät'am*    *däss*  
 come.VN-POSS.3SM-ACC    very    IDPH.happy  
*blo-ŋŋ = all.*  
 say\CNV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG = AUX.NPST  
 'His coming made me very happy.'
- e. Baye (1999: 35)  
*libb*      *blä-h*                      *tämälkät-äw!*  
 heart    say\CNV-2SM    observe\IMP.SBJ.2SM-OBJ.3SM  
 'Watch him/it carefully (lit. watch him/it saying, "Heart"!)
- f. *k-ajjä-h<sup>w</sup>-at*                              *wädih*    *fik'ir~fik'ir*  
 ABL-see\PFV-SBJ.1SG-OBJ.3SF    since    love  
*al-ä-ŋŋ.*  
 say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
 'Since I have seen her, I feel like being in love (lit. ..., [it] says to me, "love, love").'
- g. *wät'-wa*                      *wiha~wiha*    *jät-l = all.*  
 stew-POSS.3SF    water                      3SM-say\IPFV = AUX.NPST  
 'Her stew tastes like water (lit. Her stew says, "water, water").'
- h. adapted from Baye (1999: 37)  
*s-aj-at*    *inäk'-at~inäk'-at*  
 while-SBJ.1SG.see\IPFV-OBJ.3SF    strangle\IMP.SBJ.2SM-OBJ.3SF  
*al-ä-ŋŋ*  
 say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
 'When I see her, I very much feel like strangling her (lit. ..., [it] says to me, "Strangle her, Strangle her!").'

The expression *libb alä* 'pay attention' in (14e) is probably one of the many collocations with the noun *libb* 'heart' (see Kane 1990: 71–76) which eventually became a lexicalized idiomatic expression. Most typically the nouns acting as coverbs are repeated, as in (14f–g). All the coverbs in (14) have in common that no other free lexical element can intervene between the coverb and the light verb, see (21b) and (22b), and that the coverbs cannot be modified syntactically, e.g. by determiners or case markers, such as \**wiha-w~wiha-w al-ä* (water-DEF.M~water-DEF.M say\PFV-3SM)

or \**wiḥa~wiḥa-w-n alä* (water~water-DEF.M-ACC say\PFV-3SM) for the construction in (14g).<sup>17</sup> If a noun preceding the verb *alä* ‘say’ is marked for definiteness and accusative case (15a) or accompanied by a relational prefix (15b–c), it functions as an adverbial modification, not as a coverb.

(15) a. Baye (1999: 35)

*kasa aster-in ginbar-wa-n al-at.*  
Kasa.M Aster.F-ACC forehead-POSS.3SF-ACC say\PFV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SF

‘Kasa hit Aster on her forehead (lit. Kasa said [it] to Aster on her forehead).’

b. Täklä Maryam (1964EC: 47, translation Ronny Meyer (RM))

ወባዋ እንደ መልቀቅ  
*wäba-wa indä- mä-lk’äk’*  
malaria-DEF.F like VN-leave\VN

ብላኛለኝ።

*bla-ገገ = allä-ttj.*

say\CNV.SBJ.3SF-OBJ.1SG = AUX.NPST-SBJ.3SF

‘I am almost cured from the malaria (lit. the malaria said to me [something] like leaving).’

c. *mata s-i-nnaddäd bä-boks*  
evening while-3SM-be\_angry\IPFV MIL-fist

*al-ä-ገገ.*

say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG

‘When he got angry in the evening, he hit me with a clenched fist (... he said [it] to me with a clenched fist).’

<sup>17</sup> The use of a reduplicated imperative verb as a coverb, as shown in (14h), deviates from this rule. The verb remains invariant in the 2SM, regardless of whether the speaker, who is the actual addressee of the imperative, is male or female. However, the object index is variable and must agree with the person, number and gender of the referent.

In contrast to the complex predicates with a coverb in (14), the adverbial does not necessarily immediately precede the verb *alä* ‘say’, but other constituents can intervene between them, as in (16), which are modifications of the sentences (15a, c).

- (16) a. *ginbar-wa-n*                      *sost*    *gize*    *al-at*.  
 forehead-POSS.3SF-ACC    three    time    say\PFV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SF  
 ‘On her forehead, he hit her three times.’
- b. *bä-boks*    *mata*            *sost*    *gize*    *al-ä-jjɲ*.  
 MIL-fist    evening    three    time    say\PFV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
 ‘With a clenched fist, he hit me three times in the evening.’

The verb *alä*, originally meaning ‘say something to someone’, has different semantics depending on the constructions in which it occurs. In complex predicates with a coverb, it only indicates that the denoted situation is noncausal and serves as a host for verbal inflectional morphology (see below). However, when used with adverbials, such as in (15), it forms idiomatic expressions that convey the idea of ‘performing’ or ‘showing’ something related to the adverbial. Without an adverbial and in the imperative conjugation, *alä* functions as an encouragement to perform (usually to repeat) an action, or as a discourse particle with which the speaker announces the end of a discussion or his intended departure (see Meyer 2009: 32–33).

As seen in (14), the verb *alä* ‘say’ is morphologically irregular in Amharic. It uses different bases for the primary conjugations (see Table 1), i.e. *al-* (perfective, verbal noun), *l-* (imperfective), *blä-* (coverb) and *bäl-* (imperative), as well as the invariant base *bal* for the mediopassive (*tä-bal-ä* ‘be said’), indirect causative (*as-bal-ä* ‘let say’) and pluractional (e.g. the reciprocal *tä-ba~bal-ä* ‘say to each other’). Although these bases look like suppletive stems nowadays, they all developed from a single Ethiosemitic root, namely √ b-h-l ‘say’ (for details, see Baye 1999: 5–29; Leslau 1987: 89).

Semantically, the Amharic verb ‘say’ belongs to the group of verbs of speaking, some of which are shown in (17).

- |      |                                |                 |                                  |
|------|--------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| (17) | INTRANSITIVE                   |                 | BITRANSITIVE                     |
| a.   | <i>tʃohä</i>                   | ‘cry’           | e. <i>t’äjjäk’ä</i> ‘ask’        |
| b.   | <i>tänʃokaffokä</i>            | ‘whisper’       | f. <i>azäzzä</i> ‘order’         |
| c.   | <i>täntäbattäbä</i>            | ‘stutter’       | g. <i>näggärä</i> ‘report, tell’ |
| d.   | <i>täk<sup>w</sup>älattäfä</i> | ‘stammer, lisp’ |                                  |

The intransitive verbs of speaking have only a subject argument, while the ditransitive verbs have two additional arguments: the addressee (indirect object) and the theme (direct object). The direct object can be an accusative-marked noun phrase (19) or an infinitive clause (18a), a complement clause marked by the complementizer *ind(ä)*- ‘that’ (18b), or a direct quotation marked by the converb of the verb ‘say’ (18c), which imbeds the quotations as theme object into the argument frame of the verb ‘ask’. Thus, the converb of ‘say’ in (18c) has a comparable function to the complementizer *indä*- in (18b) and is therefore also analyzed as part of the theme argument. Both objects of ‘say’ are optional, and each of them can also appear on its own.

- (18) a. *bä-sälam bet mä-gbat-attfi-n*  
 [MIL-peace house VN-enter\VN-POSS.1PL-ACC]<sub>THEME</sub>  
*t’äjjäk’-ättf-in.*  
 ask\PFV-SBJ.3SF-[OBJ.1PL]<sub>ADDRESSEE</sub>
- b. *bä-sälam bet indä-gäbba-n*  
 [MIL-peace house COMP-enter\PFV-1PL]<sub>THEME</sub>  
*t’äjjäk’-ättf-in.*  
 ask\PFV-SBJ.3SF-[OBJ.1PL]<sub>ADDRESSEE</sub>
- c. *bä-sälam bet gäbba-tfih<sup>w</sup> bla*  
 [MIL-peace house enter\PFV-2PL say\CNV.3SF]<sub>THEME</sub>  
*t’äjjäk’-ättf-in.*  
 ask\PFV-SBJ.3SF-[OBJ.1PL]<sub>ADDRESSEE</sub>  
 ‘She asked us whether we got home safely.’

In (18), the addressee of the ditransitive verbs of speaking is marked by the 1PL object index *-n* on the verb *t’äjjäk’ä* ‘ask’. This object index is optional and can be omitted if the respective addressee is salient in the discourse, as in (19).

- (19) Source: Dictionary Abyssinica<sup>18</sup>

የቅኔ	ተማሪ	የቁጠረውን	ቅኔ
<i>jä-k’ine</i>	<i>tämari</i>	<i>jä-k’wätt’är-ä-w-in</i>	<i>k’ine</i>
LNK-poem	student	[LNK-count\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SM-ACC	poem] <sub>THEME</sub>
ለማሳረፍ	ለመግባት	ነገረ።	
<i>lä-massaräm</i>	<i>lä-mämhir-u</i>	<i>näggär-ä.</i>	

<sup>18</sup> <https://dictionary.abysinnica.com/ነገረ>, 23/01/2023

DAT-VN.correct\VN [DAT-teacher-POSS.3SM]<sub>ADDRESSEE</sub> report\PFV-3SM

‘The poetry student recited the poem which he had composed (lit. counted) to the teacher for correcting.’

All verbs of speaking can be modified adverbially by a coverb clause, which can be a construction consisting of a coverb and the verb ‘say’, as in (20).

(20) *ʔu~ʔu bla f’oh-ättf.*

IDPH.distress say\CNV.3SF cry\PFV-3SF

‘She cried out in distress.’

According to Mengistu (1996: 8–10; 1995: 4–6), the verb *alä* ‘say’ is a generic verb that lacks the inherent manner component of the other verbs of speaking in (17). Its immediately preceding coverb is not an object argument nor an adverbial modification, as it normally cannot be marked for definiteness and accusative case, be passivized (for further details, see Meyer 2009: 23–26) or be pronominalized (i.e. indexed by an object suffix on the verb). In Meyer (2009: 25), I argue therefore that the coverb and the light verb ‘say’ represent a fixed semantic and morphosyntactic construction in which the coverb does not function as a separate syntactic argument.

In contrast to the ditransitive verbs of speaking in (17), no syntactically free constituent can intervene between the coverb and the verb ‘say’, regardless of whether the coverb is an ideophone, a quotation, or another element. A construction analogous to (21a), in which the addressee (*lämämhiru* ‘to the teacher’) immediately precedes the verb *alä* ‘say’, is ungrammatical (21b).

(21) a. *jih mindin n-äw bla lä-mämhir-u t’äjjäk’-ättf.*

PRX.SM what COP-3SM say\CNV.3SF DAT-teacher-DEF.M ask\PFV-3SF

‘She asked the teacher saying, “What is this?”.’

b. *\*jih mindin n-äw lä-mämhir-u bla*

PRX.SM what COP-3SM DAT-teacher-DEF.M say\CNV.3SF

*t’äjjäk’-ättf.*

ask\PFV-3SF

Similarly, the degree adverb *bät’am* ‘very’ in (14d) cannot occur between the coverb and the verb ‘say’. Thus, a clause like (22b) is unacceptable; instead (22a) is used.

- (22) a. *bät'am däss blo-ገገ = all.*  
 very IDPH.happy say\CNV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG = AUX.NPST  
 'I am very happy (lit. it made me very happy).'
- b. \**däss bät'am blo-ገገ = all.*  
 IDPH.happy **very** say\CNV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG = AUX.NPST

However, bound grammatical morphemes can be prefixed to the verb 'say', as in (23a), and the contrastive focus marker *-mm* can be suffixed to coverbs (23b).

- (23) a. *t'ärmus-u sibbirr s-i-l*  
 bottle-DEF.M IDPH.**break\_completely** **while-3SM-say**\IPFV  
*bät'am dänäggät'-k<sup>w</sup>.*  
 very be\_shocked\PFV-1SG  
 'I was very shocked when the bottle broke completely.'
- b. Source: Sebiawi<sup>19</sup>
- |   |                              |                           |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>የታገለጠ</i>  | <i>ለውጥ</i>                   | <i>ያመጣል፤</i>              |
| <i>jä-tagḡäl-ä-w</i>  | <i>läwt'</i>                 | <i>j-amät'all</i>         |
| LNK-struggle\PFV-3SM-DEF.M  | change                       | 3SM-bring\IPFV = AUX.NPST |
| 'The one who struggles brings change.'  |                              |                           |
| <i>ይልታገለጠ</i>   | <i>ቁጭ</i>                    | <i>ብሎ</i>                 |
| <i>j-al-tagḡäl-ä-w</i>  | <i>k'utt'</i>                | <i>blo</i>                |
| LNK-NEG-struggle\PFV-3SM-DEF.M  | IDPH.sit_down                | say\CNV.3SM               |
| <i>በባርነት</i>  | <i>ሲገዛ</i>                   |                           |
| <i>bä-barinnät</i>  | <i>s-i-ggäzza</i>            |                           |
| MIL-slavery   | while-3SM-be_subjugated\IPFV |                           |
| <i>ይኖራል፤</i>  |                              |                           |
| <i>ji-nor = all;</i>  |                              |                           |
| 3SM-live\IPFV = AUX.NPST  |                              |                           |
| 'the one who does not struggle lives subjugated in slavery without any improvement (lit. by sitting down);' |                              |                           |
| <i>ቁጭም</i>  | <i>ባለበት</i>                  |                           |

<sup>19</sup> [http://sebiawi.blogspot.com/2014/01/blog-post\\_5253.html](http://sebiawi.blogspot.com/2014/01/blog-post_5253.html), 31/08/2023

<b><i>k'uttj'-imm</i></b>	<b><i>bä-al-ä-bb-ät</i></b>	
IDPH.sit_down-FOC	MIL-say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-MIL-OBJ.3SM	
ጾጥታል	ማለት	ነው።
<i>ji-mot = all</i>	<i>malät</i>	<i>n-äw.</i>
3SM-die\IPFV = AUX.NPST	say\VN	COP-3SM

‘that means that he dies in exactly the situation in which he is (lit. where he is sitting down).’

Many complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ seem only to have a subject argument, and thus appear to be intransitive (see, e.g., Leslau 1995: 583; and for Ethiosemitic in general, Cohen et al. 2002: 236; Ferguson 1970: 74). However, some of them also have an overt object (24a) or cross-reference it with an object index on the verb (24b) (see Meyer 2009: 36–38). Formally, the object constituents in (24) are marked like a primary object of a monotransitive verb, i.e. with the accusative suffix *-n* in (24a) and with the simple object index on the verb in (24a, b) – in contrast to the applied object in (25), in which the object index is preceded by the applicative suffix *-bb* (glossed MIL).

- (24) a. *hizb-u*                      *korona-n*  
 [people-DEF.M]<sub>i</sub>    [COVID-ACC]<sub>j</sub>  
*tfila*                      *blo-t = all.*  
 IDPH.ignore    say\CNV.SBJ.3SM<sub>i</sub>-OBJ.3SM<sub>j</sub> = AUX.NPST  
 ‘The people ignored the COVID disease.’
- b. *goräbet-e-n*                      *sälam* *s-i-l-at*  
 neighbor-POSS.1SG-ACC    peace    while-SBJ.1SG-say\IPFV-OBJ.3SF  
*zimm*                      *al-ättf-ijñ.*  
 IDPH.silent    say\PFV-SBJ.3SF-OBJ.1SG  
 ‘When I greeted my neighbor, she kept silent to me.’
- (25) *atkilt-ottf-e*                      *t’iwilligg* *al-u-bb-ijñ.*  
 vegetable-PL-POSS.1SG    IDPH.wilt    say\PFV-SBJ.3PL-MIL-OBJ.1SG  
 ‘My vegetables wilted on me [i.e. to my detriment].’

Complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ can also function as experiencer verbs, by cross-referencing the experiencer with the object index on the verb (26).



- (26) a. *b-alläf-ä-w* *j-al-kä-ገገ*  
 MIL-pass\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SM LNK-say\PFV-SBJ.2SM-OBJ.1SG  
*tizz* *blo-ገገ = all.*  
 IDPH.remember say\CNV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG = AUX.NPST  
 ‘It reminded **me** of what you said to me last time.’
- b. *abbat-inna innat-e*  
 father-and mother-POSS.1SG  
*niffikk’* *al-u-ገገ.*  
 IDPH.yearn\_very\_much say\PFV-SBJ.3PL-OBJ.1SG  
 ‘I miss my parents (lit. father and mother) very much.’

Since the verb ‘say’ in complex predicates can have an additional non-subject argument, namely the addressee of the verbal action marked with the simple object index, e.g. (14a) and (18), it must be monotransitive (see Meyer 2009: 23–27). Consequently, the verb ‘say’ is the only verb of speaking with two arguments, while all other verbs of speaking in (17) are either intransitive or ditransitive.

According to Wetter (1999; 2002) and Crass et al. (2001), the verb ‘say’ in combination with a coverb has been grammaticalized by extending the semantics of the subject from an agentive human, e.g. (14a), to a non-human participant (14b), which then opened the way for the formation of a number of new complex predicates based on different types of coverbs, not limited to direct quotations, as shown in the remaining examples in (14). In Amharic, these complex predicates have become so productive that they now form a separate class of verbs, alongside the class of simple verbs derived from roots by nonconcatenative morphology (see Table 1 in Section 1).

Complex predicates with an ideophone as coverb form a distinct subtype because they usually occur in pairs expressing a causal/noncausal contrast using the light verbs *alä* ‘say’ and *adärrägä* ‘do’, respectively. Simple verbs, on the other hand, derive causative verbs morphologically, e.g. *bässälä* ‘be ripe, be cooked’ vs. the causatives *a-bässälä* ‘ripen, cook’ and *as-bässälä* ‘have something cooked’ (see Kane 1990: 896–897), not by alternating light verbs (see Mengistu 2010: 292–294).

Moreover, only complex predicates with an ideophone as coverb express the causal/noncausal contrast with the two light verbs *alä* ‘say’ and *adärrägä* ‘do’, as shown in (13). Consequently, the coverbs in constructions like (14e–h) are not ideophones, as they only cooccur with the noncausal verb *alä* ‘say’ but never with its

causal counterpart *adärrägä* ‘do’. Furthermore, there are also a number of complex predicates based on the verb *adärrägä* ‘do’, not *alä* ‘say’, whose coverb is often a loanword (see Section 7).

As with the verb *alä* ‘say’, the ideophones in complex predicates with *adärrägä* ‘do’ do not represent a theme argument or an adverbial, but are simply juxtaposed to the light verb with which they form a fixed lexical and morphosyntactic construction. As shown in (27), no other free syntactic constituent can intervene between the ideophone and the light verb *adärrägä* ‘do’. Sentence (27b), for instance, is unacceptable because the place adverbial *wädä gon* appears between the ideophone and the light verb.

- (27) a. *borsa-wa-in wädä gon k’uttj’ adärräg-ättj.*  
 bag-DEF.F-ACC towards side IDPH.sit do\PFV-3SF  
 ‘She put her bag down sideways.’
- b. \**borsa-wa-in k’uttj’ wädä gon adärräg-ättj.*  
 bag-DEF.F-ACC IDPH.sit towards side do\PFV-3SF

The light verb *adärrägä* ‘do’ is typically used (mono)transitively, but can also appear like an intransitive verb with a single subject argument, especially with ideophones expressing an activity, as in *f’iffirr adärrägä* (IDPH.dance do\PFV.3SM) ‘he does dancing’ (Mengistu 2010: 301). In transitive use, the valence of *adärrägä* includes a patient object that is directly affected by the verbal event.

Although the opposition noncausal/causal is typical for complex predicates with an ideophone as coverb, for semantic reasons not all ideophones occur with the two light verbs (Mengistu 2010: 301–303). For example, most ideophones derived from an intransitive root (see Section 6) whose agentive subject is not affected by the verbal event lack the noncausal complex predicate, as in *ziffinn adärrägä* ‘do singing’ (< √ z-f-n ‘sing’) without noncausal \**ziffinn alä*. In contrast, ideophones derived from intransitive roots in which the subject is also affected by the verbal event often lack the causal complex predicate, e.g. *adägg alä* ‘grow a little bit’ (< √ a-d-g ‘grow’), but no causal \**adägg adärrägä*.

Another peculiar feature of certain ideophones in complex predicates is their ability to combine with another pair of light verbs, namely noncausal *täsäynnä* ‘be named, be desired’ vs. causal *assäynnä* ‘name, feel like doing’, as in *däss täsäynnä* ‘be happy’ vs. *däss assäynnä* ‘make happy’ (Leslau 1995: 584; Kane 1990: 560–561). Whereas the occurrence

of the noncausal light verb *täsäñnä* is limited to ideophones as coverb, the causal *assäñnä* can also cooccur with other elements, as the verbal noun phrase in (28).

(28) Leslau (1995: 584)

*wädä timhirt bet mä-hed al-assäñnä-w-imm.*  
 towards school VN-go\VN NEG-feel\_to\_do\PFV.SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SM-NEG  
 ‘He doesn’t feel up to going to school.’

In some cases, the mediopassive and the causative of *ädärrägä* ‘do’, i.e. *tädärrägä* ‘be done’ and *asdärrägä* ‘let do’, can be also used as light verbs (Leslau 1995: 583). In addition, *asbalä* ‘make say, let say’, the causative of the irregular verb *alä* ‘say’, is attested in causal expressions like (29).

(29) Source: Youtube<sup>20</sup>

*በጥያቄዎ ፈገግ አስባለችው።*  
*bä-t’ijjak’e-wa fägägg asbal-ättf-iw.*  
 MIL-question-POSS.3SF IDPH.smile make\_say\PFV-SBJ.3SF-OBJ.3SM  
 ‘She made him laugh with her question.’

The use of *asbalä* as a light verb seems to be a more recent development, as it has so far not been mentioned in Amharic grammars.

## 5. Reduplicated ideophones

Ideophones can be partially or fully reduplicated, see, e.g., (6) and (30).

(30) Source: Youtube<sup>21</sup>

*አንዴ ቁጭ ቁጭ በሉ!*  
*ande k’uttf’~k’uttf’ bäl-u! (<k’uttf’ al-ä)*  
 once IDPH.sit\_down~PLR say\IMP-2PL IDPH.sit\_down say\PFV-3SM  
 ‘Sit down right now!’ [to a crowd of people] ‘sit down’

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSaWYSuJK8k>, 23/01/2023

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSau6GWJig8>, 23/01/2023

Full reduplication, however, is also found with other types of coverb in complex predicates (see, e.g., examples (14f–h)). Full reduplication occurs with all ideophones (31a–f), whereas partial reduplication only occurs with multisyllabic ideophones (31f–i).

- (31) Leslau (1995: 593–594)
- |    |                               |                                |
|----|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. | <i>t'äbb alä</i>              | 'drop'                         |
|    | <i>t'äbb~t'äbb alä</i>        | 'drip'                         |
| b. | <i>zikk' alä</i>              | 'be low'                       |
|    | <i>zikk'~zikk' alä</i>        | 'get continuously lower'       |
| c. | <i>tʃ'arr adärrägä</i>        | 'scratch a little or abruptly' |
|    | <i>tʃ'arr~tʃ'arr adärrägä</i> | 'scratch here and there'       |
| d. | <i>t'ät'a adärrägä</i>        | 'sip, drink slowly'            |
|    | <i>t'ät'a~t'ät'a adärrägä</i> | 'drink hurriedly'              |
| e. | <i>mullittʃ' alä</i>          | 'slip off'                     |
|    | <i>mullittʃ'~mullitʃ' alä</i> | 'become slippery'              |
| f. | <i>billittʃ' alä</i>          | 'flash suddenly'               |
|    | <i>billittʃ'~billitʃ' alä</i> | 'keep flashing continually'    |
|    | <i>billitʃ'~littʃ' alä</i>    | 'glitter'                      |
| g. | <i>ziggitt adärrägä</i>       | 'close suddenly and tightly'   |
|    | <i>zigit~gitt adärrägä</i>    | 'close all around'             |
| h. | <i>bissitt adärrägä</i>       | 'pierce completely'            |
|    | <i>bisit~sitt adärrägä</i>    | 'riddle (with bullets)'        |
| i. | <i>nikk'il alä</i>            | 'be suddenly uprooted'         |
|    | <i>nik'il~k'ill alä</i>       | 'be completely uprooted'       |

A formal distinction between full and partial reduplication is found in the gemination pattern. While in full reduplication the gemination of consonants is retained (31a–e), in partial reduplication it is limited to the final consonant, as shown in (31g–i) and (32b).

Partial and full reduplication of ideophones has a number of senses that can be derived from a general distributive or pluractional meaning, namely senses of higher intensity (generally continuity and frequency of the denoted verbal event), as in (31a, b, e–i), but also of accelerated speed (31d) (Leslau 1995: 593). In addition, Baye (2008: 226–227) notes that multiple partial reduplication is used to express emphasis, e.g. regarding the speed of the action or the commitment of the subject, as in (32).

(32) Baye (2008: 227, translation RM)

a. ካሳ            ወረቀቱን                    ቅድድ            አደረገው።  
*kasa            wäräk’ät-u-n            k’iddidd            adärräg-ä-w.*  
 Kasa.M    paper-DEF.M-ACC    IDPH.tear    do\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SM  
 ‘Kasa tore the paper completely.’

b. ካሳ            ወረቀቱን                    ቅድድድድድ  
*kasa            wäräk’ät-u-n            k’id~id~id~idd*  
 Kasa.M    paper-DEF.M-ACC    IDPH.tear~PLR~PLR~PLR  
*አደረገው።*  
*adärräg-ä-w.*  
 do\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.3SM

‘Kasa tore up the (sheet of) paper very quickly and completely.’

According to Baye (2008: 226–227), the number of recurrent partial reduplications of a syllable is not limited, and it can occur many times depending on the discourse context (see also Teferi & Baye 2022a: 115).

A special type of ideophones related to full reduplication are so-called “echo-words”, i.e. the combination of two juxtaposed ideophones that either denote a semantic contrast (33) or two different aspects of the same general meaning, as in *bitt’iss k’int’iss alä* ‘break abruptly and completely; die prematurely’, where *bitt’iss* is related to *bätt’äsä* ‘detach, snap’ and *k’int’iss* to *k’anätt’äsä* ‘snap off with the fingers’.

(33) Baye (2008: 229, translation RM)

ካሳ            ፈራ ተባ    አያለ  
*kasa            fära\_täba    ijjal-ä*  
 Kasa.M    IDPH.hesitant [ < fear\_be.courageous]    PROG.say\PFV-3SM

ወደ            ቤት            ገባ።  
*wädä            bet            gäbba.*  
 towards    house    enter\PFV-3SM

‘Kasa entered hesitantly into the house.’

An exhaustive list of echo-words in Amharic, as well as in Tigre and Tigrinya, is found in Leslau (1961). Amharic echo-words are also described in some detail in Teferi & Baye (2022a: 106–108), Baye (2008: 228–229) and Leslau (1995: 594–596). Some of them are shown in (34).

(34) Leslau (1995: 594–596)

- |    |                             |                 |  |
|----|-----------------------------|-----------------|--|
| a. | <i>k'uttf' biddigg</i>      | <i>alä</i>      | 'be restless'                          |
|    | (lit. sit_down + stand_up)  |                 |  |
| b. | <i>wät'a gäba</i>           | <i>alä</i>      | 'move to and fro'                      |
|    | (lit. go_out + go_in)       |                 |  |
| c. | <i>käff zigg</i>            | <i>alä</i>      | 'heave'                                |
|    | (lit. rise + be_lowered)    |                 |  |
| d. | <i>likk'imm t'irk'imm</i>   | <i>adärrägä</i> | 'clean up everything'                  |
|    | (lit. gather + hold_tight)  |                 |  |
| e. | <i>iffin tf'iffinn</i>      | <i>adärrägä</i> | 'cover up completely to choke someone' |
|    | (lit. suffocate + cover_up) |                 |  |
| f. | <i>tfikk mintfikk</i>       | <i>alä</i>      | 'be very stubborn'                     |
|    | (lit. be_stubborn + ?)      |                 |  |
| g. | <i>kimbiss mimbiss</i>      | <i>alä</i>      | 'speak incoherently, nonsense'         |

While the origin of many of the echo-words can still be related to simple ideophones or verb roots, some of them, e.g. (34f, g), do not have an obvious relation to any other lexeme. As the echo-words occur with the verbs *alä* 'say' and *adärrägä* 'do' as light verbs, they are considered ideophones. Teferi & Baye (2022a: 106–108) call these constructions "compound ideophonic verbs".

However, Amharic also has a number of echo-words that are used like nominals and that never occur as coverbs, such as *arti murti* 'nonsense speech' and *tirki mirki* 'rubbish, empty chatter' (see Bezza 2013: 58–60; Teferi & Baye 2022a: 107). Thus, as is the case of onomatopoeia, not all echo-words are ideophones, even if the majority of them belong to this group.

## 6. Derived ideophones

In addition to the lexical word class of ideophones, Amharic also productively derives ideophones by interdigitating a lexical root with one of the two templates for trilateral roots:  $C_1CC_2CC_3$  for an intensive reading and  $C_1äC_2äC_3$  for an attenuated reading, compared to the event expressed by a regularly inflected verb from the same root. This derivation is shown in (35) with the trilateral root  $\sqrt{s_1-b_2-r_3}$  'break' (for other verb types and bi- and quadrilateral roots, see Leslau 1995: 586–593).

- (35) a. INTENSIVE TEMPLATE:  $C_1CC_2CC_3$   
           *sibbirr alä*           ‘break completely, suddenly (ITR)’  
 $s_1ibb_2irr_3$    *sibbirr~sibbirr alä* ‘(several things) break completely (ITR)’  
           *sibbirr adärrägä*   ‘break completely (TR)’
- b. ATTENUATIVE TEMPLATE:  $C_1äC_2äC_3$   
           *säbär alä*           ‘crack (ITR)’  
 $s_1äb_2är_3$    *säbär~säbär alä* ‘(several things) crack (ITR)’  
           *säbär adärrägä*   ‘crack (TR)’

Derived intensive and attenuative ideophones behave exactly like lexical ideophones, i.e. they appear as the coverb of the light verbs *alä* ‘say’ and *adärrägä* ‘do’, and they can be reduplicated. Compared to conjugated simple verbs, complex predicates with the intensive and attenuative templates denote a gradation in the intensity or force of the verbal event (see e.g. Leslau 1995: 582; Baye 1999: 30–31; Mengistu 2010: 296–297; Teferi & Baye 2022a: 108–110).

Since these derived ideophones are very productive in Amharic, most verbs occur in a tripartite system that distinguishes between the neutral form, i.e. the regularly conjugated verb, e.g. for (35), the noncausal mediopassive *täs<sub>1</sub>äbb<sub>2</sub>är<sub>3</sub>ä* ‘break ITR’ or the causal simplex *s<sub>1</sub>äbb<sub>2</sub>är<sub>3</sub>ä* ‘break TR’, and its intensive and attenuative forms in (35a) and (35b) (see Mengistu 2010: 296–297).

The derivation of ideophones from other words is typologically rare. Apart from Amharic (and other Ethiosemitic languages, see Section 7), it occurs in some Bantu languages, such as Cilubà (lua) (Kabuta 2001), Shona (sna) (Franck 2014), Tetela (tll) (Tassa 2001) and Sena (Guérois this volume), and also in Bulgarian (bul) (Kovatcheva 2014).

## 7. Complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ in Ethiosemitic

Complex predicates consisting of an invariant coverb followed by the verb ‘say’ occur in all Ethiosemitic languages, and are called “(descriptive) compound verbs” or “composite verbs” in the literature. Most likely, some of these coverbs also represent

ideophones.<sup>22</sup> But ideophones are generally not distinguished from other elements (e.g. interjections or adverbials) in older grammatical descriptions. Cohen (1939: 287)—the first summary of the composite verbs in Ethiosemitic—considers them to be a language contact phenomenon due to Cushitic influence. This assumption was widely accepted by others—including Leslau (1945a: 72), Hetzron (1972: 18), Tosco (2000: 346), Appleyard (2001: 9), Cohen et al. (2002: 244)—mostly because Asian Semitic languages lack such constructions.<sup>23</sup> Ferguson (1970: 73–74) considers them a defining feature of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (for further details, see Crass & Meyer 2008: 232–233). However, Wetter (1999; 2002), Crass et al. (2001), Cohen et al. (2002) and Güldemann (2005) show that these complex predicates result from a grammaticalization process of the respective verb ‘say’, which is also found in other languages, even outside Africa (see also Mengistu 2010: 296).

One remarkable construction with the grammaticalized verb ‘say’ contains a fully reduplicated noun as coverb, as in (36), (37a) or (14f, g).

- (36) a. *tʃ’äw~tʃ’äw alä* (salt~salt) ‘taste salty’  
b. *k’ibe~k’ibe alä* (butter~butter) ‘taste/smell like butter’  
c. *tʃ’is~tʃ’is alä* (smoke~smoke) ‘smell like smoke’

- (37) a. *bird~bird al-ä-ḡḡ.*  
CNV.cold~PLR say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
‘I have the chills.’ or ‘I feel cold.’  
b. *bärräd-ä-ḡḡ.*  
be(come)\_cold\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
‘I feel cold.’

Based on a survey of their distribution in Ethiosemitic, these constructions are very widespread (for the sources, see fn.below). They have been reported for Tigrinya

---

<sup>22</sup> See also Treis (this volume) for Kambaata (ktb), a Cushitic language spoken in Ethiopia. Like Amharic, Kambaata ideophones form a distinct word class and typically occur as coverbs with the respective light verbs for ‘say’ and ‘do’, marking an intransitive/transitive contrast. Additionally, other elements can function as coverbs in Kambaata, and the border between ideophones and interjections is vague.

<sup>23</sup> In fact, similar complex predicates occur sporadically in Hebrew (heb), Babylonian Aramaic (tmr) and Neo-Aramaic (cld) (Goldenberg 2013: 224–225).



(North Ethiosemitic), Amharic and Silt’e (both Transversal Ethiosemitic), and Kistane, Muher, Gumer and Endegagn (all South Ethiosemitic). Even the little known and now extinct language Mesmes has at least one construction of this type, *k’ot’o~k’ot’o barä* ‘arrange in orderly manner (lit. say *k’ot’o k’ot’o*)’ (Ahland 2010: 111 line 7), where the reduplicated element is probably the noun ‘place’. This construction has not been mentioned in the grammars of Geez (North Ethiosemitic), and Argobba and Zay (both Transversal Ethiosemitic). In North Ethiosemitic, it seems to be limited to Tigrinya, as it does not exist in Tigre and Dahaalik. Harari (Transversal Ethiosemitic) also lacks it. However, Dahaalik and Harari have a construction in which a simple noun can be combined with the verb ‘say’, as in the Dahaalik example (38).

- (38) Dahaalik (Afroasiatic, Semitic; PC Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle, July 2019)
- |              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| <i>hibes</i> | <i>bila</i> |
| work.N       | say\PFV.3SM |
| ‘he worked’  |             |

According to Beniam (2013: 150–152), the construction of simple noun plus verb ‘say’ is very common and productive in Harari, and often coexists with a regularly inflected verb from the same root. The meaning of such constructions with respect to the regular verbs is still not well described, but the coverbs are clearly nouns.

The combination of a reduplicated noun as coverb and the verb ‘say’ typically describe the perception of tastes and smells, e.g. (14g) and (36), besides a few other sensations, such as love in (14f) or the perception of temperature in (37a). However, in contrast to constructions with an ideophone, a fully reduplicated noun as a coverb cannot form a causal counterpart by exchanging the light verb ‘say’ with the verb ‘do’ (or the causative of ‘say’). Furthermore, reduplicated nouns or imperative verbs as coverbs do not denote a change in intensity, speed, etc., as is the case with fully reduplicated ideophones (Section 5), but only express a sensory experience related to the semantics of the respective simple nouns. In some cases, the semantics of such a complex predicate denotes nuances that cannot be expressed by a simple verb, as in (37), where only the construction with the reduplicated noun ‘cold’ in (a) has the sense of ‘having the chills’, from which probably the second sense ‘feeling cold’ developed, which is also denoted by the simple verb in (37b).

Loan verbs from languages with fully vocalized verb stems are often integrated into Amharic using a complex predicate based on the light verb *adärrägä* ‘do’. This is

because these stems cannot be easily converted into a consonantal root that would fit the conjugational templates. The loan verbs from English in (39) illustrate this phenomenon.

- (39) a. *tajb adärrägä* <English *type* ‘type (v.)’  
b. *kalär adärrägä* <English *color* ‘color (v.)’  
c. *kopi adärrägä* <English *copy* ‘copy (v.)’  
d. *särǧäri ädärrägä* <English *surgery* ‘operate’

The noncausal counterpart of the complex predicates in (39) are formed by exchanging *adärrägä* ‘do’ with its mediopassive derivation *tädärrägä* ‘be done’, e.g. *tajb tädärrägä* ‘be typed’.<sup>24</sup> A few of the loanwords, usually those with three consonants, may also be converted into a root, and then be inflected like a simple verb of Type B, e.g. *täjjäbä* ‘type’ or *källärä* ‘color’ for the examples (a) and (b) in (39).

In the previous sections, it has been shown that Amharic has two different types of ideophones that occur as coverb in a complex predicate with the verb *alä* ‘say’, as summarized in (40).

- (40) a. Basic lexical ideophones, e.g. *zimm alä* ‘be quiet’  
b. Derived degree ideophones through combining a verb root with either an intensive or attenuative template, e.g. *sibbirr alä* ‘break completely/suddenly’ vs. *säbärr alä* ‘crack’

Not much is known about the actual distribution of the two types of ideophones identified for Amharic in (40) in other Ethiosemitic languages. The results of a survey based on published sources and a short questionnaire answered by specialists in some of the languages are given in Table 2.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> In Zay (Transversal Ethiosemitic), ideophones and loanwords systematically use different pairs of light verbs to express the noncausal/causal relation. With ideophonic coverbs, the light verbs are *ba:l* ‘say’ and its causatives *?abä:n* ‘cause to say’ or *?atbi:n* ‘facilitate to say’, whereas loanwords as coverbs cooccur with the light verbs *ha:n* ‘become’ and *sa:n* ‘do’ (Meyer 2005: 164–171; see also Meyer 2006: 816–817).

<sup>25</sup> The survey is based on information gathered from the following sources: Amharic (Leslau 1995: 580–596), Argobba (Wetter 2010: 148–150, 214–215), Dahaalik (PC with Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle July 2019), Endegagn (Yohannes 2015: 138–145; PC with Yohannes Adigeh, July 2019), Gafat

Language	Basic lexical ideophones		ideophones from other roots	
	only ‘say’	noncausal/causal contrast	no pairs	intensive/attenuative pair
<b>North Ethiosemitic</b>				
†Geez		yes	?	?
Dahaalik		yes	no	no
Tigre		yes	yes	
Tigrinya		yes		yes
<b>Transversal Ethiosemitic</b>				
Amharic		yes		yes
Argobba		yes		yes
Harari		yes		yes
EG Silt’e		yes	yes	
EG Zay		yes	yes	
<b>South Ethiosemitic</b>				
GG Kistane		yes		yes
GG Muher		yes	yes	
GG Gumer		yes	yes	
GG Endegagn		yes	yes	
†Gafat	yes		?	?

(EG East Gurage, GG Gunnän Gurage)

**Table 2:** Distribution of ideophones in Ethiosemitic.

Table 2 shows that ideophones exist in all Ethiosemitic languages, even if the situation for the two extinct languages, Geez and Gafat, is not entirely clear. For these two languages, the coverb of complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ could also be an interjection, as assumed by Praetorius (1886: 156–157) for Geez in (41).

---

(Leslau 1945b: 88 further examples given on pp. 150, 153, 180), Geez (Praetorius 1886: 157), Gumer (Völlmin 2017: 171–173; PC with Sascha Völlmin, July 2019), Harari (Beniam 2013: 138–154), Kistane (PC with Bedilu Wakjira, July 2019), Muher (own fieldwork data, 2010), Silt’e (Gutt 1997: 933; PC with Rawda Siraj, July 2019), Tigre (Raz 1983: 66–67; PC with Saleh Idris, July 2019), Tigrinya (Tsehaye 1979: 108–111; PC with Shimelis Mazengia and Dagne Machew, July 2019) and Zay (Meyer 2005: 164–167).

(41) Geez (Afroasiatic, Semitic)

- |    |                 |              |   |
|----|-----------------|--------------|---|
| a. | <i>s'ätt'</i>   |              | 'shh (interjection used to call for silence)' |
| b. | <i>s'ätt'</i>   | <i>ji-be</i> | i. 'He said, "Shh!"' > ii. 'He kept quiet.'   |
|    | INTJ/IDPH.quiet | 3SM-say\PFV  |   |

If we assume that Geez possessed constructions like those in the Amharic example (7), the element *s'ätt'* in (41a) could also be an ideophone in an emphatic construction without the verb 'say'. For Geez, at least one pair with the noncausal/causal contrast was reported (42).

(42) Geez (Afroasiatic, Semitic; Praetorius 1886: 156–157; Leslau 1987: 12)

- |    |             |               |    |                |                  |
|----|-------------|---------------|----|----------------|------------------|
| a. | <i>?oho</i> | <i>bihl-ä</i> | b. | <i>?oho</i>    | <i>?a-bäl-ä</i>  |
|    | IDPH.yes    | say\PFV-3SM   |    | IDPH.yes       | CAUS-say\PFV-3SM |
|    | 'he agreed' |               |    | 'he persuaded' |                  |

The Geez examples (41) and (42) illustrate the general problem of distinguishing between ideophones and other word classes, especially interjections. Some of them may actually belong to two word classes, without a strict demarcation line, as in the Amharic example (12), where *imbi* 'no' is a quoted interjection in (12a), but also resembles an ideophone in the broader semantic sense of 'refuse' in (12b).

The most important morphosyntactic criterion for the definition of ideophones in Amharic is that they cooccur with a noncausal/causal light verb pair. This probably presents a more general feature of ideophones in Ethiosemitic. The noncausal light verb is the verb 'say', while its noncausal counterpart is either the light verb 'do' or the causative of 'say' in Ethiosemitic. However, the absence of the causal or, less frequently, also the noncausal light verb does not automatically mean that the coverb is not an ideophone. The noncausal/causal contrast expressed by the verbs *alä* 'say' and *adärrägä* 'do' systematically excludes certain semantic verb types. Without going into detail, with the exception of Gafat, all of the other Ethiosemitic languages in Table 2 have at least a few coverbs that occur in contrasting noncausal/causal pairs, and thus most probably represent ideophones.

Ideophones derived from roots occur in most Ethiosemitic languages (see also Appleyard 2001: 5). They are missing only in Dahaalik, and probably also in Geez and Gafat. In the remaining languages of Table 2, they occur in two distributions: In Tigre, East Gurage and Gunnän Gurage except Kistane, ideophones can be derived

from roots through different patterns, which do not contrast in terms of intensity/attenuation. Amharic, Argobba, Harari, Kistane and Tigrinya, on the other hand, regularly derive two types of ideophones from roots in order to express an intensive vs. attenuative contrast, which is, in turn, opposed to a semantically neutral, regularly inflected verb, as described for Amharic in Section 6 and for Tigrinya in (43), where only gemination or its absence expresses the contrast in degree.

(43) Tigrinya (Afroasiatic, Semitic; PC Shimelis Mazengia, July 2019)

a. **Neutral**

*säbir-u*

break\CNV-3SM

'he broke it'

b. **Intensive**

*sibbir*      *?a-bil-u*

IDPH.break CAUS-say\CNV-3SM

'he broke it completely'

c. **Attenuative**

*sibir*      *?a-bil-u*

IDPH.break CAUS-say\CNV-3SM

'he broke it somewhat'

All Ethiosemitic languages which express the intensity/attenuation contrast through derived ideophones from the same verbal root seem to be in close contact with Amharic. Argobba and Tigrinya border the Amharic homeland, and the Kistane homeland is close to Addis Ababa. Harari has a very large diaspora in Addis Ababa and other Ethiopian cities (see Beniam 2013: 4), where Amharic is used as a lingua franca. Thus, contact with Amharic could have triggered the introduction of the intensive/attenuative contrast in these languages.

## 8. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that ideophones form a separate word class in Amharic whose members commonly cooccur as a coverb in a complex predicate with the light verbs 'say' and 'do'. All Ethiosemitic languages have at least a few lexical ideophones that can express this noncausal/causal contrast, even though the causal light verb may differ across the languages. Some ideophones can also be the input of a nominalization process with the suffix *-ta*. Syntactically, ideophones resemble verbs. Their position is fixed to the clause-final syntactic slot, usually occupied by verbs, and ideophones can also take direct objects and be modified by converb clauses.

Ideophones are morphologically simple forms that do not inflect, and which can be reduplicated to express a pluractional meaning. Phonologically, ideophones are characterized by a stress on the ultimate syllable, but do not exhibit uncommon segmental features.

Ideophones are the only coverbs in complex predicates with the two light verbs ‘say’ and ‘do’ which express a noncausal/causal contrast. Other coverbs, such as interjections, adverbials, reduplicated nouns and verbs, and quotations, do not express this contrast.

Moreover, complex predicates with the light verbs ‘say’ and ‘do’ are so common in Amharic that they must be considered a separate inflectional verb class, contrasting with the regularly inflected verbs formed by nonconcatenative morphology. This verb class is characterized by reduced morphological complexity: it inflects only with the paradigms of two light verbs and can only contrast noncausal and causal events using distinct light verbs. Probably for to this reason, complex predicates with the verb ‘say’ are a very productive strategy to incorporate loanwords that do not easily fit into nonconcatenative inflectional morphology.

Finally, Amharic has a special type of ideophones derived from roots by two distinct templates, expressing the contrast between an intensified and an attenuated event. Derivational processes of ideophonization are rare from a typological point of view, but they also exist in Ethiosemitic languages in close geographical contact with Amharic, namely Tigrinya, Argobba, Kistane and Harari.

## **Acknowledgements**

This study of ideophones in Amharic was supported by a public grant overseen by the French National Research Agency (ANR) as part of the program “Investissement d’Avenir” (ANR-10-LABX-0083). It contributes to the IdEx Université de Paris (ANR-18-IDEX-0001). The analysis has benefited greatly from many fruitful discussions with members of the EFL research groups *Ideophones and Interjections in a Typological, Areal and Diachronic Perspective* (axe 3, GL1) and *Contact-Induced Morphosyntactic Change* (axe 2). I am also grateful for the helpful comments made during the *Workshop on Ideophones and Interjections* at the *Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea* from 21–24 August 2019 in Leipzig and the *9th Annual Conference and Annual Research Week of the College of Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism and Communication*, 10–

12 May 2022, Addis Ababa. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Maria Bulakh, Dagnaw Mache, Fekede Menuta, Rawda Siraj, Saleh Idris, Shimelis Mazengia, Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle, Sascha Völlmin and Yohannes Adigew for providing me with data and information on several Ethiosemitic languages. I also express my appreciation to Sitti Gragn Nasir, Seid Ahmed Ali and Delombera Negga for their patience in explaining and correcting the Amharic data. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors, especially Yvonne Treis, for their constructive suggestions.

## Abbreviations

1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person	F = feminine	PFV = perfective
ABL = ablative	FOC = focus	PL = plural
ACC = accusative	GG = Gunnän Gurage	PLR = pluractional
AUX = auxiliary	IDPH = ideophone	POSS = possessive
C = slot for a consonant in an inflectional template	IMP = imperative	PROG = progressive
CAUS = causative	INTJ = interjection	PRX = proximal demonstrative
CND = conditional	IPFV = imperfective	PST = past
CNV = converb	ITR = intransitive	REL = relative clause marker
COMP = complementizer	LNK = linker (genitive, relative verb)	SBJ = subject
COP = copula	M = masculine	SF = singular-feminine
DAT = dative	MIL = malefactive, instrumental, locative	SG = singular
DEF = definite	NEG = negation	SM = singular-masculine
DIM = diminutive	N = noun	SNG = singulative
EC = ethiopian calendar	NPST = non-past	TR = transitive
EG = east Gurage	OBJ = object	VN = verbal noun (infinitive)

## References

- Ahland, Michael. 2010. *Language death in Mesmes: a sociolinguistic and historical-comparative examination of a disappearing language*. Dallas TX: SIL International.
- Alemayehu Haile. 1987. Lexical stress in Amharic. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 20. 19–43.
- Anbessa Teferra & Grover Hudson. 2007. *Essentials of Amharic*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.

- Appleyard, David. 2001. The verb 'to say' as a "verb recycling" device in Ethiopian languages. In Andrzej Zaborski (ed.), *New data and new methods in Afroasiatic linguistics – Robert Hetzron in memoriam*, 1–11. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Armbruster, Carl Hubert. 1908. *Initia Amharica. An introduction to spoken Amharic. Part I: grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baye Yimam. 1999. The verb 'to say' in Amharic. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 32(1). 1–50.
- Baye Yimam. 2008. *Jəʔamarijña səwasiw [Amharic Grammar]*. Addis Ababa: Elleni Publishing.
- Beniam Mitiku. 2013. *Harari: a descriptive grammar*. Doctoral dissertation, Addis Ababa University.
- Bezza Tesfaw Ayalew. 2013. *The submorphemic structure of Amharic: toward a phonosemantic analysis*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Cohen, David & Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle & Martine Vanhove. 2002. The grammaticalization of 'say' and 'do': an areal phenomenon in East Africa. In Tom Güldemann & Manfred von Roncador (eds.), *Reported discourse: a meeting ground for different linguistic domains*, 227–251. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Cohen, Marcel. 1939. *Nouvelles études d'éthiopien méridional*. Paris: Ancienne Honoré Champion.
- Crass, Joachim, Barbara Dehnhard, Ronny Meyer & Andreas Wetter. 2001. Von 'sagen' zum Verbbildungsmorphem: Die Grammatikalisierung des Verbs 'sagen' einmal anders. *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere* 65. 129–141.
- Crass, Joachim & Ronny Meyer. 2008. Ethiopia. In Bernd Heine & Derek Nurse (eds.), *A linguistic geography of Africa*, 228–249. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dingemanse, Mark. 2012. Advances in the cross-linguistic stud of ideophones. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 6(10). 654–672. <https://doi.org/10.1002/lnc3.361>.
- Dingemanse, Mark. 2018. Redrawing the margins of language: lessons from research on ideophones. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 3(1). 1–30. [https://doi.org/DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.444](https://doi.org/DOI:https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.444).
- Eberhard, David M. & Gary F. Simons & Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2022. *Ethnologue: languages of the world*. 25th edn. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online version. <http://www.ethnologue.com>. (1 September, 2022)



- Edzard, Lutz. 2019. Amharic. In John Huehnergard & Na'ama Pat-El (eds.), *The Semitic languages*, 202–226. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Ferguson, Charles A. 1970. The Ethiopian language area. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8(2). 67–80.
- Franck, Genevieve E. 2014. *Ideophones in Manyika Shona: a descriptive analysis of ideophones and their function in Manyika (Bantu)*. BA Thesis, State University of New York.
- Girma Awgichew Demeke & Ronny Meyer. 2008. The enclitic *-mm* in Amharic: reassessment of a multifunctional morpheme. *Linguistics* 46(3). 607–628.
- Goldenberg, Gideon. 2013. *Semitic languages: features, structures, relations, processes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Guérois, Rozenn. 2024. Ideophones in Sena (Bantu, Mozambique). *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads* 4(1): 244–289.
- Güldemann, Tom. 2005. Complex predicates based on generic auxiliaries as an areal feature in Northeast Africa. In Erhard F. K. Voeltz (ed.), *Studies in African Linguistic Typology*, 131–154. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gutt, Ernst-August. 1997. Concise grammar of Silt'e. In Eeva H. M. Gutt & Hussein Mohammed Mussa (eds.), *Silt'e-Amharic-English dictionary (with a concise grammar by Ernst-August Gutt)*, 896–957. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.
- Hetzron, Robert. 1972. *Ethiopian Semitic: studies in classification*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hetzron, Robert. 1977. *The Gunnän-Gurage languages*. Napoli: Istituto Orientale di Napoli.
- Hudson, Grover. 2013. *Northeast African Semitic: lexical comparisons and analysis*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Huehnergard, John & Na'ama Pat-El. 2019. Introduction to the Semitic languages and their history. In John Huehnergard & Na'ama Pat-El (eds.), *The Semitic languages*, 1–21. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Isenberg, Charles W. 1842. *Grammar of the Amharic language*. London: Church Missionary Society.
- Kabuta, Ngo Semzara. 2001. Ideophones in Cilubà. In Erhard F. K. Voeltz & Christa Kilian-Hatz (eds.), *Ideophones*, 139–154. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kane, Thomas Leiper. 1990. *Amharic-English dictionary*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

- Kilian-Hatz, Christa. 2020. Ideophones. In Rainer Vossen & Gerrit Dimmendaal (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of African languages*, 695–703. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kovatcheva, Mira. 2014. An unrecognized class of words in Bulgarian and their word-formation. *Rivista de Linguistica* 26(2). 183–208.
- Leslau, Wolf. 1945a. The influence of Cushitic on the Semitic languages of Ethiopia: a problem of substratum. *Word* 1. 59–82.
- Leslau, Wolf. 1945b. *Gafat documents: records of a South Ethiopic language – grammar, text and comparative vocabulary*. New York, NY: American Oriental Society.
- Leslau, Wolf. 1961. Echo words in Ethiopic. *Annales d'Éthiopie* 4. 205–238.
- Leslau, Wolf. 1987. *Comparative dictionary of Gə'əz: Gə'əz-English / English-Gə'əz with an index of the Semitic roots*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Leslau, Wolf. 1995. *Reference grammar of Amharic*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Ludolf, Hiob. 1698a. *Grammatica Linguae Amharicae*. Frankfurt/Main: Prostat apud Johannem David Zunnerum.
- Ludolf, Hiob. 1698b. *Lexicon Amharico-Latinum*. Frankfurt/Main: Prostat apud Johannem David Zunnerum.
- Mengistu Amberber. 1995. Functional verbs in predicate formation: event-type hierarchy and grammaticalization. In Jocelyn Ahlers, Leela Bilmes, Joshua S. Guenter, Barbara A. Kaiser & Ju Namkung (eds.), *Proceedings of the twenty-first annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, February 17-20, 1995 – general session and parasession on historical issues in sociolinguistics/social issues in historical linguistics*, 1–11. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Linguistic Society.
- Mengistu Amberber. 1996. The transitivity of verbs of “saying” revisited. In José Camacho, Lina Choueiri & Maki Watanabe (eds.), *The proceedings of the fourteenth West Coast Conference in Formal Linguistics*, 1–15. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Mengistu Amberber. 2010. The structure of the light verb construction in Amharic. In Brett Baker & Mark Harvey (eds.), *Complex predicates: cross-linguistic perspectives on event structure*, 291–318. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mengistu Amberber. 2023. Amharic. In Ronny Meyer, Bedilu Wakjira & Zelealem Leyew (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Ethiopian languages*, 414–442. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2005. *Das Zay: Deskriptive Grammatik einer Ostguragesprache (Äthiosemitisch)*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.

- Meyer, Ronny. 2006. Lokale Varietäten des Zay – Ein Survey. In Gerald Heusing (ed.), *Sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zum 16. Afrikanistentag, Leipzig, 25./26.9.2003*, 147–169. Berlin: LIT.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2009. The quotative verb in Ethiosemitic languages and Oromo. In Joachim Crass & Ronny Meyer (eds.), *Language contact and language change in Ethiopia*, 17–42. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2011a. The role of Amharic as a national language and an African lingua franca. In Stefan Weninger (ed.), *The Semitic languages: an international handbook*, 1212–1220. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2011b. Amharic. In Stefan Weninger (ed.), *The Semitic languages: an international handbook*, 1178–1212. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2012. The converb in Amharic. In Domyenyk Eades (ed.), *Grammaticalization in Semitic*, 165–192. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2016a. Aspect and tense in Ethiosemitic languages. In Lutz Edzard (ed.), *The morpho-syntactic and lexical encoding of tense and aspect in Semitic*, 159–239. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2016b. The Ethiopic script: linguistic features and socio-cultural connotations. *Oslo Studies in Language* 8(1). 457–492.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2016c. Emergence of tense in Ethio-Semitic. In Ronny Meyer & Lutz Edzard (eds.), *Time in languages of the Horn of Africa*, 179–236. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2018. On the internal classification of Ethiosemitic. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 168(1). 93–124.
- Praetorius, Franz. 1879. *Die amharische Sprache*. Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses [Reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1970].
- Praetorius, Franz. 1886. *Äthiopische Grammatik mit Paradigmen, Litteratur, Chrestomathie und Glossar*. Karlsruhe: H. Reither.
- Raz, Shlomo. 1983. *Tigre grammar and texts*. Malibu: Undena Publications.
- Täklä Maryam Fantaye. 1964EC. ስላሳ ገላላ ስላሳ ገላላ (hohitā t'ibāb zäsīnā s'ihuf) [Way of wisdom for the art of writing]. Addis Ababa: Bərhanəna Sālam Printing Press.
- Tassa, Obombe-Lukumbu. 2001. La formation des radicaux déidéphoniques et des idéophones déverbatifs en tetela (dialected ewango). In Erhard F. K. Voeltz & Christa Kilian-Hatz (eds.), *Ideophones*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Teferi Mulugeta & Baye Yimam. 2022a. The morphology of Amharic ideophones. ስላሳ ገላላ Zena-Lissan 31(1).

- Teferi Mulugeta & Baye Yimam. 2022b. The syntax of Amharic ideophones. *Macrolinguistics and Microlinguistics* 3(1–2). 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.21744/mami.v3n1/2.28>.
- Titov, Evgeniï Grigor'evich. 1976. *The Amharic language*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Tosco, Mauro. 2000. Is there an “Ethiopian language area”? *Anthropological Linguistics* 42(3). 329–365.
- Treis, Yvonne. 2024. Ideophones in Kambaata (Cushitic): grammar, meaning and use. *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads* 4(1): 147-200.
- Tsehaye Teferra. 1979. *Reference grammar of Tigrinya*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, School of Languages and Linguistics.
- Voeltz, Erhard F. K. & Christa Kilian-Hatz. 2001. Introduction. In Erhard F. K. Voeltz & Christa Kilian-Hatz (eds.), *Ideophones*, 1–8. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Völlmin, Sascha. 2017. *Towards a grammar of Gumer. Phonology and morphology of a Western Gurage variety*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Zürich.
- Wetter, Andreas. 1999. *Zur Entstehung eines Auxiliars im Amharischen—Grammatikalisierungsprozesse im nordäthiopischen Sprachraum*. Master Thesis, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz.
- Wetter, Andreas. 2002. A new analysis of the alə compound verbs in Amharic based on the grammaticalization theory. In Baye Yimam, Richard Pankhurst, David Chapple, Yonas Admassu, Alula Pankhurst, & Birhanu Tefera (eds.), *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, 6–11 November 2000*, 1829–1839. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies.
- Wetter, Andreas. 2003. Ideophones in Amharic. In Kézié K. Lébiakaza (ed.), *Actes du 3e Congrès Mondial de Linguistique Africaine, Lomé 2000*, 257–267. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Wetter, Andreas. 2010. *Das Argobba: Eine deskriptive Grammatik der Varietät von Shonke und T'ollaha (Zentraläthiopien)*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Yohannes Adigeh. 2015. *Descriptive grammar of Endegagn*. Doctoral dissertation, Addis Ababa University.
- Zealelem Leyew. 2011. Onomatopoeic-ideophones in Ethiopian languages, with particular reference to Amharic. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 44. 1–46.

#### CONTACT

ronny.meyer@inalco.fr