



Topicalization through Direct Object Scrambling in Amharic

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Abstract

This study investigates object scrambling in Amharic, focusing on how it marks sentence topic through this process. It also examines the linguistic features that determine scrambling. To attain the objectives, both primary and secondary data were gathered. The secondary data were sourced from written materials, while the primary data were mainly gathered through elicitation followed by free speech recording. For the elicitation, three male and three female speakers of the Gojjam dialect were purposively selected based on their linguistic competence. The data were then organized, transcribed, glossed, translated, and analyzed. The findings show that Amharic encodes sentential topic syntactically via object scrambling. The role of an argument as a direct object is typically determined by its case rather than word order, specifically for definite objects marked for accusative case. Amharic has two types of direct objects based on case marking: one marked with the accusative case and the other unmarked. A case-marked object is typically definite, and definite direct objects are the most topical, as they are always marked with the accusative case, unlike indefinite direct objects. Both agreeing and non-agreeing definite accusative case marked objects are topical. Amharic verbs agree with their direct object only when it is definite and case-marked. Object scrambling is used exclusively for case-marked direct objects. Scrambling accusative case unmarked indefinite direct objects bears ungrammatical structures as Amharic does not scramble indefinite direct objects. This study could lead to further research on object scrambling in other Semitic languages.

Keywords: Differential object marking and differential object indexization, Information structure, scrambling, topic

1. Introduction

Amharic is an Ethio-Semitic language and the most widely spoken Semitic language in the world, next to Arabic (Meyer & Demeke, 2007). It is the official and lingua franca language of Ethiopia. As a lingua franca, it is spoken by various ethnic groups, particularly in major cities and towns. It is the official language of Ethiopia, as well as several federal regions, including the Amhara

regional state. Amharic has a canonical SOV word order and is a nominative-accusative case marking language, using case markers to distinguish between subjects and objects. Additionally, it employs non-canonical word orders for specific functions (i.e., for marking topic and focus). The language uses non-canonical syntax for structuring information. Information structure (IS) is consisting of information units: given/old-new, topic-

comment, etc., (Cheng, 2012:492 and Halliday, 1967:202). This study focuses specifically on the concept of topic among the various informational units.

Amharic topicalizes objects, complements, and adjuncts by moving them to the clause initial position, where the subject typically appears. As a result, both core and non-core arguments topicalization is common. The language marks sentential topics morphologically or syntactically or by using both ways simultaneously. The study examines topicalization through object scrambling in Amharic following Lambrecht's (1994) theoretical framework of information structure. The terms information packaging, information structure, and functional sentence perspective are often used interchangeably by various scholars to refer to the same concept. Trask (2007:102) notes that the study of sentences and utterances in terms of their information structure was initiated by the Prague School linguists, particularly Czech scholar Vilém Mathesius, under the label "functional sentence perspective" in the early 20th century. New Mark (1988:61) also states FSP treats the arrangement of a clause constituent in relation to its linguistic, situational and cultural context. Matić (2015:95) defines IS as "a subfield of linguistic research dealing with the ways speakers encode instructions to the hearer on how to process the message relative to their temporary mental states." Information structure is closely connected to both utterance/sentence structures, primarily concerned with how a speaker organizes an utterance within a specific context to enhance communication. Normally, it deals with how a message is sent rather than what the message is all about.

The question of how information is structured in a sentence is crucial for communication. Lambrecht (1994:7) emphasizes that information structure is not about the structure of discourse itself but about the systematic arrangement of clauses within it. It deals with the question of how and specifically in what order the speaker prefers to present the information of a clause. Cheng (2012:492) also views information structure as "one aspect of the textual organization of language, referring to the organization of a text in terms of the functions "Given" and "New." Overall, information structure plays a vital role in communication, as the clarity and impact of a clause's message relies on the organization of its elements.

IS contains various information units. Information unit is what the speaker selects to encode as a unit of discourse (Halliday, 1967:202). Based on their function, information structure is segmented into information units such as given/new and topic/comment. These categories are often called pragmatic statuses (Payne, 1997:261) or pragmatic/discourse roles (Burling, 1992:246). Thus, these terms are used alternatively.

Cheng (2012:492) believes that the need to encode information structure is language universal, but the specific methods of encoding vary significantly across the world's languages. In English, word order is chiefly determined by syntactic factors, such as the encoding of grammatical relations like subject and object, raising the important question of how English marks information structure. Languages differ in the linguistic means they use to encode information units

or structural categories (Krifka & Musan, 2012:30). The range of linguistic devices used to encode information structure is numerous; languages apply morphological, lexical, syntactic and prosodic devices although these are often optional. Some languages allow various means of changing word orders to encode IS syntactically. Word order variation is one method of forming allo-sentences, which convey the same basic meaning but differ in how information structure is encoded. Such sentences are pragmatically divergent in the prosodic, lexical or syntactic strategy used to encode IS. The disparity in the IS of clauses is invariably perceived in terms of contrast between allo-sentences (Lambrecht, 1994:6). Thus, allo-sentences play a crucial role in realizing IS. Pairs of allo-sentences, such as basic vs. scrambled clauses, non-topicalized vs. topicalized clauses, active vs. passive clauses, and basic vs. dislocated constructions, encode IS. Information structure can therefore be expressed through various allo-sentences each associated with a specific function in discourse.

Compared to other Semitic languages, Amharic has been the subject of significant linguistic research, including senior essays, MA and PhD theses, and various descriptive works by different scholars. Many studies have explored various linguistic aspects of the language, such as phonology, morphology, and syntax. However, to the best of my knowledge, studies on its pragmatic aspects are limited. I have reviewed the following studies, as they are directly relevant to this work.

Eilam and Kramer (n.d.) study verb-medial word orders in Amharic, examining various

verb-medial constructions in the language. Meyer and Demeke (2007) also explore the IS of Amharic sentences with a focus on topic and topicalization. They provide a detailed analysis of the topic-marking morphemes /-mma/ and /-ss/, categorizing them as contrastive topic markers. They also examine the similarities and differences between the morphemes based on their pragmatic functions. Additionally, they discuss the morphological and syntactic marking of both core and non-core arguments as topics. They conclude that Amharic marks sentential topics syntactically in various ways. This study differs from theirs in both scope and focus, as it specifically investigates the syntactic topicalization of direct object (DO) arguments through scrambling.

2. Methods

This research is a descriptive study based on the theory of functional sentence perspective. It uses qualitative description since the data is qualitative and cannot be measured numerically. To achieve the objectives, primary and secondary data were gathered. Secondary data were collected from published and unpublished sources, which give valuable linguistic insights. Primary data were collected from six informants speaking the Gojjam dialect through elicitation, followed by free speech recording. The informants were purposely selected based on their linguistic competence to ensure the quality of the data. Elicitation was used to gather clauses with both scrambled and non-scrambled direct objects by asking the informants to provide examples of each. IPA symbols were constantly used to transcribe the data. The linguistic data were glossed based on the Leipzig glossing rules using three-line interlinear morpheme-morpheme

glossing. The first line is the phonemic transcription; the second is the linear morphological analysis; and the third line is the English free translation.

3. Results and Discussion

Topic falls under the category of information units or pragmatic functions. As to Dryer (2007:148), pragmatic functions involve a wide range of considerations many of which are not fully understood. A topic can be an issue at both the sentence and discourse levels. In linguistic literature, the definition of sentence topic varies. Trask (2007:299) defines topic as the part of the sentence/utterance that the entire statement is "about". It represents what the sentence is about, with the rest of the clause serving as the comment of the topic. The concept of topic is complementary to that of comment although not all sentences exhibit a clear topic-comment structure. Sentences that convey entirely new information, for example, lack a topic. Sentences/utterances can be divided into topic-comment structures based on their communicative context. Question-answer pairs often serve as a useful tool for identifying topic-comment divisions. Example:

1. (a). *kasa mindn näw jä-bäll-a-w*
 Kasa what is RM-eat.PF-3SG.M-
 OBJ.SG.M
 ‘What did kasa eat?’
- (b). *kasa dabbo näw jä-bäll-a-w*
 Kasa bread is RM-eat.PF-
 3SG.M- OBJ.SG.M
 ‘It was bread that Kasa ate.’

The proper name "*kasa*" is the subject or an available topic, while the verb phrase */dabbo näw jäbällaw/* functions as a comment or focus domain in the response clause in (1b). The noun */dabbo/* acts as the focus center

because it corresponds with the question word */mindn/* in (1a), with the predication in (1b) concerning the subject of the clause. In this way, sentence topics can be identified in responses to questions requesting information about someone or something. Since Amharic is a wh-word in-situ language (i.e., the wh-words typically do not move to the initial position in basic clauses) the word */mindn/* ‘what’ and the noun that it replaces occupy the same slot. In sentence (1b), the topic can be reduced to the pronoun */issu/* ‘he’ or omitted entirely, as it is an expected topic. Amharic often deletes or reduces old information to a pronominal form. Therefore, sentence topics can be left unstated, with the possibility of a null topic expression or referential null. Typically, the topic is discourse old and tends to be reduced to a pronoun or omitted altogether.

A topic expression always refers to a topic (or referent), but the reverse is not always true because topic is not always explicitly marked as a topic expression. A topic is not necessarily encoded as a topic expression in every sentence. As to Dryer (2007:149), given or expected topic entities are often realized through reduced linguistic forms, such as pronouns, or may not be expressed at all, which is referred to as "null anaphora." In some languages, it is common for sentences with a topic entity to lack an overt topic expression. Thus, when discussing a "sentence without a topic," it's important to distinguish between topic entities and topic expressions.

Amharic, as a radical pro-drop language, often omits subject/topic in the presence of agreement marking. Verbs include subject, direct object, and indirect object agreement

markers, but the two object markers do not appear simultaneously. In Amharic, the subject, direct object, and indirect object can be omitted, and there is no need for these arguments to be explicitly stated. When subject and object pronouns are absent, the agreement suffixes are the only overt indicators of these arguments. Unlike object agreement, subject agreement is mandatory and occurs alongside subject pro-drop. In Amharic, the sentence topic can either be deleted or explicitly stated, but a topical referent is not always encoded via a grammatically marked topical construction. In fact, a noun phrase corresponding to the topic may be omitted if it co-refers. In neutral sentences, where no element is focused, independent pronouns are generally omitted because Amharic is a pro-drop language, allowing for subject and object pro-drop. Example:

2. (a). *almaz-n säddäb –kʷ-at*
 almaz-ACC insult.PF-1SG-3SG.F
 'I insulted Almaz.'
- (b). *säddäb - kʷ-at*
 insult. PF-1SG-3SG.F
 'I insulted her.'

In these sentences, the topic and subject coincide because they are basic declarative clauses with a topical subject. The subject position is the locus of topicality in basic declarative clauses. In (2b), the subject/topic element /*ine*/ 'I' and the object /*issuan*/ 'her' are elided since Amharic is a radical pro-drop language. Unlike focus, the topic is not necessarily overtly stated. In both sentences, the morphologically implied topic is the personal pronoun 'I'. Amharic verbs always show subject agreement. The Amharic pronouns that translate 'I' and 'her' do not

appear as independent words in these sentences. Instead, the subject and object's person, number, and gender (for 2nd or 3rd person singular) are marked on the verb. Independent pronouns are used explicitly when the subject or object is emphasized.

In Amharic, sentence constituents can be overtly marked or unmarked as topics. Non-subject topic is among the crucial informational units marked in many languages. Various elements of the clause can be marked as topics, but the subject is the most unmarked topical element in Amharic because it is a verb final SOV language with relatively free word order. Amharic word order doesn't indicate grammatical functions when the direct object is indefinite. However, different sentence elements can become topics to convey various information structural configurations or for stylistic purposes. The first syntactic element in an Amharic sentence is typically the topic. While there are many variations, the topic generally appears at the beginning of basic declarative clauses and can be marked either morphologically, syntactically, or through both means.

3.1.Object Scrambling in Amharic

Word order refers to how words are arranged to construct a sentence. Scrambling involves altering the basic word order of a language due to syntactic movement. Proper word order is essential for effective communication. If words are put in the wrong order, they can create confusion, making a sentence unclear or incorrect. When the word order is disrupted, it typically alters the meaning of the sentence, often making it difficult to understand. The examples below show how a simple change in word order

alters sentence meaning. In languages like English, word order is crucial because it has a neutral case marking system, where the subject (S), agent (A), and patient (P) are marked the same way. Crystal (2008:336) explains that neutral case refers to “a noun whose role in the action is identified by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself.” For Example:

3. a. John kissed Mary.
- b. Mary kissed John.

These clauses differ in meaning due to word order variations, where the subject and object arguments are inverted. The meaning variation is solely due to word order change. In languages like English, the sequence of words is crucial for conveying the speaker's intended meaning, as it can significantly affect sentence interpretation. English typically has a fixed word order, with the arrangement of sentence elements playing a key role in conveying grammatical information. Similarly, in Amharic, word order changes can also create meaning distinctions, especially when the direct object is indefinite. Although Amharic is a nominative-accusative case marking language, the subject and object of a verb may not always be formally marked. This is because indefinite direct objects are not marked for the accusative case. For Example:

- 4 (a). *k'äbäro bag bäll-a*
fox sheep eat. PF-3SG.M
'A fox ate a sheep.'
- (b). *bäg k'äbäro bäll-a*
sheep fox eat. PF-3SG.M
'A sheep ate a fox.'

These clauses have the same lexical units but have different meanings due to word order change. In Amharic, accusative case

unmarked direct objects are not scrambled, as there is no overt accusative case marker for indefinite direct objects. These clauses lack any overt case markers that would help identify grammatical relations, meaning there is no nominative or accusative case marker distinguishing the two core arguments. However, general/world knowledge plays a crucial role in the contextual interpretation of these clauses. Syntactically, both clauses are equally acceptable, but semantically, clause (4a) appears more natural than clause (4b). The referents of the subject and the DO in both clauses share similar semantic properties (e.g., animate). The grammatical relations of the arguments are determined by word order.

3.1.1. Scrambling Direct Object with the Definiteness Suffix

In Amharic, only definite human and non-human DOs are marked with the accusative case, while indefinite DOs remain unmarked. This marking isn't primarily for avoiding ambiguity, but for emphasizing the object's prominence. When the direct object is indefinite and unmarked for accusative case, word order changes affect meaning, as the grammatical roles are determined by word order. However, when the DO is marked with the accusative case, word order variation doesn't change the meaning; as the accusative marker ensures the subject and object maintain their grammatical roles regardless of position. Example:

5. (a) *kasa dabbo-w-n bäll-a-(w)*
Kasa bread-DEF-ACC eat. PF-3SG.M-OBJ.3SG.M 'Kasa ate the bread.'
- (b) *dabbo-w-n kasa bäll-a-w*
bread-DEF-ACC Kasa eat. PF-3SG.M-OBJ.3SG.M 'The bread, kasa ate.'

In these clauses, word order changes do not bring a basic shift in meaning since the grammatical functions of the arguments are not determined by word order variation. The examples convey grammatical information through inflection. Unlike English, which relies heavily on syntax, Amharic typically uses morphology to encode meaning and grammatical relationships. Variations in syntactic structure and IS play a major role in determining word order. Word order changes in Amharic are often used to convey pragmatic information, such as topic and focus. According to Kroeger (2005:198), the basic word order tends to be the one that occurs most frequently in discourse. Example (5a) represents a basic declarative clause, while example (5b) is a non-basic one. In (5a), the word order is subject- object-verb (SOV), whereas in (5b), it is object-subject-verb (OSV). Amharic has multiple word orders, including the canonical order as well as alternatives like topicalization, scrambling, dislocation, and cleft constructions (Meyer and Demeke 2009). Clause (5b) is non-basic due to the scrambled DO. Amharic allows both SOV and OSV structures, with the OSV order typically used when the scrambled direct object and the subject convey given and new information, respectively. Information is generally structured in a given-new order.

As demonstrated by the previous example, word order variation results in changes in both syntax and information structure. In sentence (5a), the subject merges with the topic, while in (5b), the direct object becomes the topic. In (5a), the subject and the topic are fully integrated (i.e., expressed by the same argument), with the subject functioning as the unmarked topic. However, in (5b), the topic

is syntactically marked due to object scrambling. Lambrecht (1994: 118) notes that subjects generally show a strong tendency, or even an absolute requirement, to be topics. This distinction illustrates that the subject and topic of a sentence are not always the same, as evidenced by (5b), where the subject and topic are separate. This shows that sentential topics are not necessarily grammatical subjects, and vice versa. Sentence (5b) uses the less common OSV word order, whereas SOV in (5a) is more typical. Although OSV is grammatically acceptable, it deviates from the basic word order due to its pragmatic emphasis, making it marked, despite still being correct.

Dryer (2007:73) states that in languages having alternative word orders, one order is normally much more frequent than the others. Sentences (5a) and (5b) essentially convey the same basic meaning but differ in structure. They do not vary in the information they express about the world, but rather in how that information is packaged. Amharic allows its speakers to choose how to present information to their addressees, enabling them to convey the same truth conditional meaning in different ways. These alternative structures are not used in the same contexts due to differences in syntax and information structure. The subject-predicate structure in (5a) typically reflects the unmarked topic-comment IS, while in (5b), the topic is marked through a change in basic word order. In (5a), the topic is the inherently definite noun "Kasa," while in (5b), the direct object "bread" becomes the topic through scrambling. This scrambling process foregrounds the patient and de-topicalizes/focalizes the agent. In (5b), the definite noun "bread" is identified as the

topic, with the rest of the clause serving as the comment, providing additional information about the topic.

The word order change resulting from scrambling leads to a shift in IS as shown in the previous examples. Both clauses use the same lexical elements and express the same proposition, so they convey the same meaning, but in different ways. Apart from the differences in syntactic structure and IS, the central meaning remains the same. In clause (5a), the syntactic structure and information structure align, as it follows the basic declarative word order. However, in clause (5b), these structures are distinct or orthogonal because it deviates from the basic word order. While clause (5a) is pragmatically unmarked, clause (5b) is pragmatically marked through the non-canonical word order, known as scrambling. Amharic uses syntax as a means for encoding IS. These clauses are used in different communicative contexts due to their differences in syntactic and information structure.

As mentioned earlier, a sentence topic can be the subject, a definite direct object or even a non-core argument. Both topical and non-topical DOs can optionally agree with the verb. For example:

6. (a) *kasa dabbo-w-n bäll-a*
 Kasa bread-DEF-ACC eat-PF-
 3SG.M 'Kasa ate the bread.'
 (b). *dabbo-w-n kasa bäll-a*
 bread-DEF-ACC Kasa eat-PF-
 3SG.M 'The bread, kasa ate.'

In sentence (6b), the direct object argument /*dabbown*/ is topical in the non-basic clause, but it is not topical in the subject-topical

basic clause in (6a). The direct object in both clauses is overtly marked with the accusative case suffix /-n/. Unlike subject agreement markers, the direct object agreement marker is not a mandatory grammatical feature in either clause. Since the direct object agreement marker is optional, it is not suffixed to the verb in these examples. Amharic intransitive verbs agree only with the subject, as they are monovalent, whereas transitive verbs may agree either solely with the subject or with both the subject and the direct object, but it agrees with the DO only when it is definite. Agreement with the direct object is determined by definiteness rather than information structure. Object scrambling is specific to transitive verbs; a transitive verb with a lexical object NP may or may not involve object agreement. This demonstrates the interaction between the semantic notion of definiteness and object marking.

Object marking in Amharic takes two forms: a marker attached to the nominal object (i.e., an accusative case marker) and a verbal agreement suffix for object marking (i.e., direct object indexation). A direct object (DO) can optionally agree with the verb, and object agreement only occurs with presupposed entities. While object agreement can, but does not always, occur with a full nominal object, it is always obligatory when an argument has been pro-dropped. Both agreeing and non-agreeing definite DOs can be sentence topics. Amharic typically scrambles only grammatically or pragmatically definite DOs. In clause (6b), the object is scrambled because it is grammatically definite.

Amharic can be classified as a differential object marking (DOM) language (Bossong,

n.d), as it features both accusative case-marked and accusative case-unmarked direct objects (DOs). DOM in Amharic is influenced by information structure (IS) and often reflects the topical status of the patient. As shown in clause (7a), only direct objects that can be topicalized via scrambling are marked with the case suffix /-n/, while direct objects that cannot be scrambled remain unmarked, as seen in (7b). Therefore, a single grammatical function (i.e., DO) is encoded differently depending on the DOM. Example:

7. (a) *kasa mäs 'haf-u-n wässäd-ä-w*
 Kasa book-DEF-ACC take.PF-
 3SG.M-OBJ.3SG.M
 ‘Kasa took the book.’
 (b) *kasa mäs 'haf wässäd-ä*
 Book Kasa take.PF-3SG.M
 ‘Kasa took a book.’

In clause (7a), the direct object is the definite accusative case-marked noun /*mäs 'hafun*/ ‘the book,’ while in clause (7b), the DO is an indefinite accusative case-unmarked noun /*mäs 'haf*/ ‘a book.’ Unlike the DO in (7a), this DO cannot trigger agreement with the verb. With indefinite DOs, object agreement results in ungrammaticality. Amharic verbs only agree with definite DOs, and the agreement is determined by definiteness rather than information structure. Amharic has restricted DO marking, as it does not mark indefinite DOs. Overt accusative case marking and object agreement are not applied to all objects in Amharic. Therefore, it is a DOM language, as it marks a single grammatical function in two distinct ways. DOM is closely linked to information structure and the topical status of an argument, often indicating the topicality of a patient in Amharic. Accusative case-marked

and unmarked objects exhibit distinct information structures.

As mentioned earlier, the verb and its DO involve a DO agreement marker and an accusative case marker, respectively, but only when the object is definite. An accusative case-marked direct object (DO) is considered definite, as the marking depends on both grammatical and pragmatic definiteness. The DO of a verb can also be pragmatically definite. Example:

8. (a) *kasa anbässa-wotf/n-gäddäl-ä-atf/n*
 äw (Weldu 2004:6)
 kasa lion-PL--ACC kill.3SG.M- OBJ.3PL
 ‘Kasa killed the lions.’
 (b) *anbässa-wotf/n kasa gäddäl-ä-atf/n*
 äw
 lion-PL-ACC Kasa kill.3SG.M- OBJ.3PL
 ‘The lions, Kasa killed.’

In these clauses, the direct object /*anbässawotf/n*/ is not marked for definiteness grammatically, but instead is marked pragmatically based on the physical context. The sentences may be used in a situation where the lions are physically present and Kasa is caught red-handed killing them. As a result, in addition to grammatically definite direct objects, Amharic also scrambles pragmatically definite direct objects, as seen in (8b). Here, the topical direct object /*anbässawotf/n*/ is marked with the accusative case, but the definiteness marker is not overtly expressed, likely because the definiteness is conveyed pragmatically through context rather than through morphology. In these clauses, definiteness is understood in relation to the immediate situational context. The context suggests a definite interpretation of the noun /*anbässawotf/n*/ ‘the lions,’ even without an

explicit definiteness marker. Therefore, definiteness is inferred from the shared knowledge of the situation between the speakers, and previous mention of the noun is not necessary for the addressee to recognize its definiteness. Instead, the addressee relies on the situational context to understand the reference. In this case, the direct object in both clauses is pragmatically definite. This demonstrates that Amharic distinguishes between grammatical and pragmatic definiteness: grammatical definiteness is overtly marked morphologically, while pragmatic definiteness is conveyed through situational context.

Like DOs marked with definiteness suffixes, those with possessive suffixes, demonstrative

Table 1. Possessive suffixes with example

Persons	Noun	Case Marker	Gloss	Persons	Noun	Case Marker	Gloss
1S	<i>mäs 'hafe</i>	-e _j e	'my book'	2PL	<i>mäs 'haf-atft/hu</i>	-hu	'you book'
1PL	<i>mäs 'hafatftfin</i>	-n	'our book'	3MS	<i>mäs 'hafu</i>	-u	'his book'
2MS	<i>mäs 'hafh</i>	-h	'your book'	3FS	<i>mäs 'hafua</i>	-u	'her book'
2FS	<i>mäs 'hafj</i>	-j	'your book'	3PL	<i>mäs 'hafatftfäw</i>	-w	'their book'
2HON	<i>mäs 'hafwo(t)</i>	-wo(t)	'your book'	3HON	<i>mäs 'hafatftfäw</i>	-w	'His/her book'

This table shows the Amharic possessive suffixes corresponding to each person. The suffixes can also mark direct object arguments. For example:

9. (a). *kasa mäs 'haf-e-n wässäd-ä-w*
 Kasa book- POSS.1SG-ACC take.PF-3SG.M-OBJ.3SG.M
 'kasa took my book.'

- (b) *mäs 'haf-e-n kasa wässäd-ä-w*

and possessive determiners and various definite objects (e.g., proper names) can be topics, since they are marked for accusative case. According to Leslau (1995:181), Amharic accusative case suffix is associated with the definiteness of the object argument, highlighting a phenomenon known as differential object marking. The accusative case marker must be used when the object is definite, possessed, or a proper name.

3.1.2. Scrambling Direct Object with Possessive Suffix

Amharic marks possession through noun suffixes, and direct objects with possessive suffixes can become the sentence topic. Here are Amharic possessive suffixes.

book-POSS.1SG-ACC Kasa take.PF-3SG.M-OBJ.3SG.M
 'My book, kasa took.'

Example (9a) is a basic declarative clause with an unmarked topic, while (9b) is a non-basic declarative clause with a marked topic. In (a), the topic is the inherently definite proper name 'kasa'. In contrast, the definite noun phrase /*mäs 'hafen*/ 'my book' is scrambled and becomes the topic in (9b), as it

is both definite and accusative case marked. The noun /*mäs'haf*/ is marked for definiteness by the 1st person possessive suffix /-e/. Direct objects that are marked with a possessive suffix become sentence topics, as they are definite and accusative case marked.

3.1.3. Scrambling Direct Object with Possessive Determiner

Amharic uses possessive determiners to mark possession. These determiners consist of the genitive prefix /*jä-*/ combined with a personal pronoun. Beyond direct objects marked with possessive suffixes, Amharic also scrambles

Table 2. Possessive determiners

Persons	Pronouns	Gloss	Persons	Pronouns	Gloss
1S	<i>jä-ine</i>	'mine'	2PL	<i>jä-innantä</i>	'yours'
1PL	<i>jä-ijña</i>	'our'	3MS	<i>jä-issu</i>	'his'
2MS	<i>jä-antä</i>	'yours'	3FS	<i>jä-issua</i>	'her'

All accusative case marked nouns specified by possessive determiners can be sentential topics. Example:

10. (a) *kasa jä-ine-n mäs'haf wässäd-ä-(-w)*
 Kasa GEN-I-ACC book
 take-PF.3SG.M- OBJ.3SG.M
 'kasa took my book.'

(b). *jä-ine-n mäs'haf kasa wässäd-ä-w*
 GEN-I-ACC book Kasa take-
 PF.3SG.M- OBJ.3SG.M
 'My book, Kasa took.'

The topic of the basic declarative clause in (10a) is unmarked, while the topic of the non-basic declarative sentence in (10b) is marked. In (10b), the possessed noun phrase /*jä-ine-n mäs'haf*/ 'my book' serves as the topic because it is definite and accusative case marked. The noun /*mäs'haf*/ is specified by

direct objects specified by a possessive determiner and uses them as sentence topics. The genitive prefix is typically attached to an independent pronoun or a noun (e.g., proper names and specified common nouns) to express ownership. To form possessive determiners, similar to the English words "mine," "yours," etc., Amharic adds the prefix /*jä-*/ meaning "of" to personal pronouns. As Dikken (2007:302) notes, like relative clauses, Amharic possessors are always encoded with the prefix /*jä-*/. The possessive determiners below are used to specify nouns.

the possessive determiner /*jä-ine-n*/ 'my'. Possessive determiners specify nouns, making the possessed noun phrase definite. In Amharic, DOs marked with a possessive determiner can become topics through scrambling, as they are both definite and accusative case marked. The IS of these two sentences follows a topic-comment structure, though it is encoded differently.

3.1.4. Scrambling Direct Object with Demonstrative Determiner

Amharic demonstrative determiners express definiteness. They share the same form with demonstrative pronouns, with the only difference being their distributional variation.

Table 3. Demonstrative Determiners

Number	Gender	Proximal	Gloss	Distal	Gloss
Singular	Masculine	<i>jih(ä)</i>	<i>This</i>	<i>Ja</i>	<i>That</i>
	Feminine	<i>jiftifi</i>	<i>This</i>	<i>jatfifi</i>	<i>That</i>
Plural		<i>innäzzih</i>	<i>These</i>	<i>innäzzija</i>	<i>Those</i>

Amharic demonstrative pronouns distinguish between near and far, and also show distinctions in number and gender. They function as determiners by preceding the noun they specify. Direct objects specified by demonstrative determiners can be topics, as they are both definite and accusative case marked. Nouns (e.g., common nouns) modified by a demonstrative determiner are also interpreted as definite. These can also serve as sentence topics, as they are definite and accusative case marked. For example:

11. (a). *kasa jihä-nn säw gäddäl-ä-w*
 Kasa this-ACC person kill-
 PF.3SG.M-OBJ.3SG.M
 ‘Kasa killed this person.’
 (b). *jihä-nn säw kasa gäddäl-ä-w*
 this-ACC person kasa kill-PF.3SG.M-
 OBJ.3SG.M
 ‘This person, Kasa killed.’

These sentences convey the same meaning, though they have different topics. In clause (11a), the topic is the inherently definite proper name ‘Kasa’. In clause (11b), the topic is the definite noun phrase */jihän säw/* ‘this person’. The sentence topic in (11a) is unmarked, as it is a basic clause with a topical subject. In contrast, the topic in sentence (11b) is marked and functions as the DO. The NP */jihän säw/* ‘this person’ becomes a marked sentence topic via scrambling in (11b), as it is specified by the determiner */jihän/* ‘this’ and takes the

accusative case suffix. The topics these clauses convey given information due to their definiteness. The referent of the noun */säw/* can be recovered from the context due to the deictic determiner */jihän/*. In both clauses, the speaker can point to the referent via index finger. In these examples, object agreement may, but does not necessarily, appear with the definite direct object, as definite direct objects specified by a deictic demonstrative may or may not trigger agreement. The IS of these sentences follows the principle of end focus, though it is packaged differently.

3.1.5. Scrambling Direct Object Demonstrative Pronoun

Demonstrative pronouns serving as DOs become sentence topics because their referents are definite and marked with the accusative case. Example:

12. (a). *kasa ja-nn wässäd-ä-w*
 Kasa that- ACC take. PF-
 3SG.M.OBJ.3SG.M
 ‘Kasa took that.’
 (b). *ja-nn kasa wässäd-ä-w*
 that-ACC kasa take. PF-
 3SG.M.OBJ.3SG.M
 ‘That, Kasa took.’

Although these clauses have different information structures, they convey the same basic meaning, following a topic-comment structure. In sentences (12a) and (12b), the topics are ‘kasa’ and */jann/* ‘that,’

respectively. Sentence (12b) shows how a demonstrative pronoun can be a topic by referring to something mentioned earlier. Demonstrative pronouns are deictic, meaning their meaning depends on the context and often involves pointing to specific referents, similar to definite descriptions.

3.1.6. Scrambling Direct Object Pronoun

Amharic object personal pronouns are definite and trigger agreement. They can function as marked sentence topics through scrambling, as their referents are identifiable from the linguistic or situational context. The referents of 1st and 2nd person pronouns are retrieved from the situational context, while third person pronouns rely on the linguistic context. Pronouns always refer to uniquely definite entities in discourse. As illustrated below, the topic of sentence (13a) is the noun ‘kasa,’ while the topic of sentence (13b) is the object pronoun /*issun*/.

- 13.(a). *kasa issu-n mätt-a-w*
 Kasa he-ACC beat.PF-3SG.M-
 OBJ.3SG.M
 ‘Kasa beat him.’

- (b). *issu-n kasa mätt-a-w*
 he-ACC Kasa beat.PF-
 3SG.M.OBJ.3SG.M
 ‘Him, kasa beat.’

Pronominal objects can be topics, as in (13b), since they are definite and always marked with the accusative case. The topical object pronoun /*issun*/ refers to a specific, definite referent within the linguistic context. The accusative case marker /-n/ signals the function of its host, as case morphology helps to identify semantic and pragmatic properties. When an argument is case

marked, this is sufficient for disambiguation. Clause (13b) denotes that object-subject-verb order is possible, but it involves object scrambling. This example shows that definite nouns with a direct object role become sentence topics only when they are marked with the accusative case. Indefinite nouns in the direct object role cannot be topics since they are unmarked for accusative case. All definite DOs require the accusative case suffix, regardless of their topical status. The suffix typically follows the first word of the noun phrase. The syntactic roles of subject and object cannot be determined solely by their positions in the sentence when the direct object is definite and accusative-marked. While the SOV and OSV orders in (13) carry the same core meaning, they are used in different contexts. The IS of the sentences follows a topic-comment articulation but is structured differently due to syntactic variation.

In addition to simple definite nouns and pronouns, direct objects specified by a relative clause can also be sentence topics, as the relative clause specifies the head noun it modifies. Example:

14. (a). *käbbädä alämu jä-gäzz-a-w-n*
surri läbbäs-ä-w

Kebede alemu RM-buy-3SGM-DEF-
 ACC trousers wear. PF-3SG.M.
 OBJ.3SG.M

‘Kebede wore the trousers that Alemu bought.’

- (b). *alämu jä-gäzz-a-w-n*
surri käbbädä läbbäs-ä-w

Alemu RM-buy-3SGM-DEF-ACC
trousers kebede wear.PF-
3SG.M.OBJ.3SG.M

‘The trousers that Alemu bought,
Kebede wore.’

Examples (13a) and (13b) are basic and non-basic declarative clauses, respectively. In both cases, the head noun /*surri*/ is specified by the relative clause /*alämu jägäzzawn*/. In (13a), the topic and subject coincide because it is a basic clause. However, in (14b), the direct object modified by the relative clause becomes the topic. In this case, the subject and topic do not overlap due to the non-canonical syntax of the clause. Topical strings can consist of multiple words that function as a single unit syntactically and semantically, as shown in (14b). In (14), the same words appear in different syntactic positions for stylistic or pragmatic reasons. While both clauses have the same core meaning, their IS differs due to syntactic variations. The clauses have a topic-comment structure, with example (14b) involving a slight pause in intonation between the topic and the comment. In writing, the pause is typically represented by punctuation.

3.1.7. Scrambling Direct Object Proper Name

Proper names are used to refer to and identify specific individuals or places. They typically represent particular entities that both the speaker and listener can recognize (Payne, 2006:101). Proper names used as direct objects can also be scrambled, as they are inherently definite and always marked with the accusative case. In the examples below, the proper names ‘*Kasa*’ and ‘*Aster*’ refer to

individuals who are unique within the discourse context. Example:

14. (a) *kasa aster-n mätt-a-t*

Kasa aster-ACC beat.PF-3SG.M-
.OBJ.3SG.F
‘kasa beat Aster.’

(b) *aster-n kasa mätt-a-t*

aster-ACC kasa beat.PF-3SG.M-
.OBJ.3SG.F
‘kasa beat Aster.’

The topics of clauses (14a) and (14b) are the inherently definite proper names *Kasa* and *Aster*, respectively. These topics are highly definite due to their nature as proper names. In (14a), the noun ‘aster’ is a non-topical direct object, but in (14b), it becomes a marked topical direct object through object scrambling. The name ‘Aster’ becomes a topic in (14b) since it is inherently definite. Thus, proper names with direct object roles can be scrambled since they are inherently definite and require an obligatory accusative case marker. Both sentences convey the same basic meaning, but the information is structured differently due to the canonical syntax in (14a) and the non-canonical syntax in (14b). The clauses have a topic-comment structure.

In Amharic, grammatically and pragmatically definite direct objects require an accusative case marker, while indefinite objects remain unmarked. Only definite objects can be scrambled and trigger agreement with the verb; indefinite objects do not agree with the verb, and adding the agreement marker to them results in ungrammatical structures. Amharic does not show differential object indexing for indefinite DOs. Unlike definite ones, indefinite direct objects do not

scramble because they lack the accusative case marker. Example:

15. (a) *Kasa dabbo bäll-a*

kasa bread eat-PF-3SG.M

‘Kasa ate bread.’

(b) **dabbo Kasa bäll-a*

bread Kasa eat-PF-3SG.M

*‘The bread ate Kasa.’

In Amharic, direct object scrambling is linked to transitivity and definiteness because only accusative-marked definite DOs are topicalized via scrambling. Indefinite DOs, or those with referents not active in the discourse, remain unmarked for the accusative case. Unlike indefinite objects, definite DOs always take an overt accusative case marker, as Amharic uses differential object marking (i.e., it marks definite and indefinite direct objects differently). The absence of the accusative case marker restricts the distribution of DOs and makes the sentence ungrammatical, as in (15b). Scrambling indefinite DOs results in ungrammatical structures since IS usually follows a given-new ordering. In Amharic, only definite direct objects, whether human or non-human, take the accusative case marker. In Amharic, SOV order works with both definite and indefinite objects, while OSV is restricted to definite accusative case marked DOs. The OSV order in (16a) seems to have a special effect that is absent in the neutral SOV order. As Dryer (2007:76) notes, one word order in a language may be pragmatically neutral, while the other adds a pragmatic effect.

4. Conclusion

Amharic typically follows an SOV word order and distinguishes subjects and objects through case marking. Since Amharic word order is flexible, object scrambling is used for topic marking. The syntactic roles of subject and object depend on case marking rather than position. Direct objects are divided into two classes based on case marking: accusative-marked DOs, which are usually definite, and unmarked DOs. Word order changes play a key role in encoding information structure in Amharic. Definite direct objects are the most topical elements, as they always have accusative case. In addition to nouns with a definite suffix, object personal and demonstrative pronouns, proper names, DOs specified by determiners nouns with a genitive case marker, and demonstrative determiners can be sentence topics. The DO of transitive verbs is accusative-marked when it is definite; otherwise, it remains unmarked. DOs that trigger agreement and non-agreeing, accusative case-marked definite objects are considered topical. Differential object marking and differential agreement marking are linked to transitivity and depend on the definiteness of the DO in Amharic. DOM becomes optional when the DO is morphologically or pragmatically definite. Therefore, definite and indefinite objects differ in their IS status. SOV and OSV word orders have different information structures. SOV order can be changed to OSV to topicalize a definite, accusative-marked direct object by scrambling.

The IS of basic SOV clauses and scrambled OSV clauses follows the principle of end-focus. The IS of these clauses is structured differently due to the word order change. In

clauses with SOV order, the topic is unmarked, whereas in clauses with OSV order, the topic is marked by object scrambling. In basic declarative clauses, the pragmatically neutral subject (e.g., focus-neutral) often conflates with the unmarked topic. Only accusative case marked DOs can become sentential topics through scrambling in Amharic. Scrambling accusative case-unmarked DOs results in semantically or logically unacceptable structures. Thus, Amharic does not allow the topicalization of indefinite DOs.

Acknowledgments

I sincerely thank all my informants for providing me the necessary data.

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