Rudiments of Tigrinya Ditransitives

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Abstract

We present the core properties of Tigrinya ditransitives, based on data elicited in a module run in 2020. Key points of interest are: that the indirect object "outcompetes" the direct object in terms of case and agreement; that ditransitives exhibit two kinds of passive, with agreement optionality not seen in the corresponding active sentences; and that some ditransitive verbs agree with the indirect object via direct object agreement.

Keywords   agreement, case, ditransitive, passive; Tigrinya (Semitic)

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1. Introduction

Tigrinya is a Semitic language with approximately 10 million native speakers in Eritrea and the Tigray region of Ethiopia (Voigt 2011: 1172). This report describes Tigrinya ditransitives, one of several topics pursued in a one-term elicitation-based course, which deliberately avoided previous studies of the language. Though findings are therefore tentative, they are nonetheless interesting. Special thanks go to our consultant, Zekaryas Solomon, who provided all data in this report.[1]

Tigrinya is verb final, with agreement for subjects, and agreement and case marking for objects (section 2). However, indirect objects "gazzump" direct objects for both case marking and an agreement slot on the verb (section 3), a behaviour not shared with prepositional-phrase recipients (section 4). Ditransitives passivise in two ways, reminiscent of but distinct from direct- versus indirect-object passives in English (section 5) but with a degree of optionality also seen in intransitives with prepositional-phrase goals (section 4). Finally, we note a further class of ditransitives, which use direct- rather than indirect-object agreement (section 6).

2. Intransitive and transitive verbs

We begin by establishing a baseline for agreement and case marking in intransitive and transitive verbs. Tigrinya pronouns and agreement distinguish first, second, and third person, singular and plural number, and masculine and feminine gender. For tractability, only third person was investigated systematically and all examples are in the past tense.

The third person intransitives in (1)–(4) show the number and gender values of the language:

(1)   ət- i   sɛbʔay nab biyɛt   mɛcʼħafti kɛyd- u
        the-MS man   to   house books   go.PST-3MSS
        'The man went to the library.'

(2)   ət- a   sɛbɛyiti kɛyd- a
        the-FS woman   go.PST-3FSS
        'The woman went.'

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(3) ət- om asɛbʔut kɛyd- om
the-MP men go.PST-3MPS
'The men went.'

(4) ət- ɛn anɛstī kɛyd- ɛn
the-FP women go.PST-3FPS
'The women went.'

Third person subject is agreement is -*u* for masculine singular, -*a* for feminine singular, -*om* for masculine plural, and -*ɛn* for feminine plural. Definite articles take the same gender and number agreement suffixes (2)–(4), with the exception of the masculine singular, which takes -*i*, not -*u* (1).

Transitive verbs agree with both the subject and the object. Moreover, the object is marked with grammatical case, which we label as 'objective' for reasons which become clear below. (5)–(8) show singular-on-singular and plural-on-plural argument combinations, for both configurations of gender.

(5) ət- i wəddi n- ɛt- a gwal təbaʔis- uw- a
the-MS boy OBJ-the-FS girl fight.PST-3MSS-3FSO
'The boy fought the girl.'

(6) ət- a gwal n- ɛt- i wəddi təbaʔis-at- o
the-FS girl OBJ-the-MS boy fight- 3FSS-3MSO
'The girl fought the boy.'

(7) ət- om asɛbʔut n- ɛt- ɛn anɛstī ħaχ'wif- omm-ɛn
the-MP men OBJ-the-FS women hug.PST-3MPS-3FPO
'The men hugged the women.'

(8) ət- ɛn anɛstī n- ɛt- om asɛbʔut ħaχ'wif- ɛnəʔ- om
the-FS women OBJ-the-MP men hug.PST-3MFS-3MPO
'The women hugged the men.'

The definite object is marked by *n-*, and the verb gains an additional morpheme to show object agreement, positioned after the subject morpheme. Additionally, there is some morphophonological liaison, which we treat as subject agreement allomorphy, when object agreement follows: 3MSS -*u* becomes -*uw*; 3FSS -*a*, -*at*; 3MPS -*om*, -*omm*; and 3FPS -*ɛn*, -*ɛnəʔ*.

The case marker *n-* also appears on direct objects in the absence of 'the', like the proper name in (9), but not in indefinites (10):

(9) dani nə- zɛk sələ   zə-   ħagɛz- o   tɛħagwis- ɛ
     Dan OBJ-Zek because REL.3S-help.PST-3MSO happy.PST-1S
     'I am happy because Dan helped Zek.'

(10) a. ət- a gwal (ħadɛ) xɛlbi ʕadig- a
             the-FS girl one dog buy.PST-3FSS
       b. *ət- a gwal nə- xɛlbi / nə- ħadɛ xɛlbi ʕadig- a(t- o)
             the-FS girl OBJ-dog OBJ-one dog buy.PST-3FSS-3MSO
             'The girl bought a dog'

3.   Ditransitives

Ditransitives differ from transitives not just in the addition of a third argument, but in appropriating direct object case marking and the corresponding agreement slot on the verb. (Subject agreement allomorphy is also slightly different.)

Examples (11)–(14) illustrate ditransitive 'buy':

(11) ət- i sɛbʔay n- ɛt- a gwal ət- i xɛlbi ʕadig- ul- la
      the-MS man OBJ-the-FS girl the-MS dog buy.PST-3MSS-3FSIO
      'The man bought the girl the dog'

(12) ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ɛt- i wəddi ət- a dəmmu ʕadig- atə- lu
      the-FS woman OBJ-the-MS boy the-FS cat buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
      'The woman bought the boy the cat'

(13) ət- om asɛbʔut n- ɛt- ɛn agwalət ət- om axalɛb sɛdid- ommə-lɛn
      the-MP men OBJ-the-FS girls the-MP dogs send.PST-3MPS- 3FPIO
      'The men sent the girls the dogs'

(14) ət- ɛn anɛstī n- ɛt- om awɛddat ət- ɛn dɛmamu sɛdid- ɛna- lom
      the-FS women OBJ-the-MP boys the-FS cats send.PST-3FPS-3MPIO
      'The women sent the boys the cats'

In all four sentences, the indirect object acquires *n*-marking and the direct object is unmarked, and it displaces object agreement from the verb, with indirect object agreement occurring instead. In form, indirect object agreement corresponds to (subject) agreement preceded by *l-* (table 1).

Direct object agreement is impossible in ditransitives. Replacement of indirect object agreement with direct object agreement in (12) is ungrammatical:

	3MS	3MS	3MS	3FP
Indirect Object	-lu	-la	-lom	-lɛn
Subject	-u			
Direct Object	-o	-a	-om	-ɛn
Determiner	-i			

Table 1: Determiner endings and (matrix past tense) agreement

(15)   *ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ɛt- i wəddi ət- a dəmmu ʕadig- at- a
       the-FS woman OBJ-the-MS boy   the-FS cat   buy.PST-3FSS-3FSO
       'The woman bought the boy the cat'

Their cooccurrence, in a modified version of (11), is also unacceptable:

(16)   *ət- i sɛbʔay n- ɛt- a gwal ət- i xɛlbi ʕadig- uw- o(l)- la
       the-MS man   OBJ-the-FS girl the-MS dog buy.PST-3MSS-3MSO-3FSIO
       'The man bought the girl the dog'

     Displacement of objective case is also obligatory, as the following variants on (12) show. First, case marking of both the direct and indirect object is impossible:

(17)   *ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ɛt- i wəddi n- ɛt- a dəmmu ʕadig- atə- lu
       the-FS woman OBJ-the-MS boy   OBJ-the-FS cat   buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
       'The woman bought the boy the cat.'

     Second, omission of case marking from the indirect object is impossible, irrespective of direct object case marking:

(18)   *ət- a sɛbɛyiti ət- i wəddi (n)-ət- a dəmmu ʕadig- atə- lu
       the-FS woman the-MS boy   OBJ-the-FS cat   buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
       'The woman bought the boy the cat.'

In contrast to direct object (10), definiteness is not a factor here. Indirect objects do not cede control of case and agreement to definite direct objects. (The sentences below are not improved by changes to agreement, such as plain subject agreement -*a* or subject and direct object agreement -*at-a*.)

(19) a. *ət- a sɛbɛyiti wəddi n- ɛt- a dəmmu ʕadig- atə- lu
          the-FS woman boy   OBJ-the-FS cat   buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
      b. ??ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ħadɛ wəddi n- ɛt- a dəmmu ʕadig- atə- lu
          the-FS woman OBJ-one boy   OBJ-the-FS cat   buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
          'The woman bought a boy the cat.'

    Last, variation in word order does not appear to affect case marking. In (20), the direct object precedes the indirect object, but it is still the latter that is case marked.

(20) ət- a sɛbɛyiti ət- a dəmmu n- ɛt- i   wəddi ʕadig- atə- lu
      the-FS woman the-FS cat   OBJ-the-MS boy   buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
      'The woman bought the boy the cat.'

    Therefore, the displacement of the direct object by the indirect object is obligatory both for agreement and case.

4. Prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases with *nab* 'to', as in (21) repeated from (1), can also be used to encode recipients, as in (22).

(21) nab biyɛt mɛcʼħafti
      to   house books
      'to the library'

(22) ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ɛt- a dəmmu nab-t- i   wəddi sɛdid- at- a
      the-FS woman OBJ-the-FS cat   to- the-FS boy   buy.PST-3FSS-3FSO
      'The woman sent the boy the cat.'

When encoded in this way, the recipient does not agree. Instead, the verb agrees with the direct object, which is also *n*-marked for case. Agreement with the indirect object is impossible:

(23) *ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ɛt- a dəmmu nab-t- i   wəddi sɛdid- at(ə)-lu/o
      the-FS woman OBJ-the-FS cat   to- the-FS boy   buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO/3MSO

      'The woman sent the boy the cat.'

    The nature of the restriction is (22)–(23) is curious. Intransitive verbs can take PP goals in Tigrinya:

(24)   ət- a   dəmmu nav-ay mɛciy-   a
         the-FS cat   to- 1s come.PST-3FSS
         'The cat came to me'

Interestingly, the recipient in (24) can also be marked on the verb. However, the agreement must be that used for a direct object (-*ni*), not an indirect one (**-lɛy*)

(25)   ət- a   dəmmu nav-ay mɛciy-   atə- ni/*lɛy
         the-FS cat   to- 1s come.PST-3FSS-1sO/*1sIO
         'The cat came to me'

The last example breaks the strict association seen so far between the patient role and direct object agreement. Direct object agreement here is coreferent with a goal. We will in section 6 see that some ditransitive verbs display a similar pattern.

Returning to (22), the impossibility of agreement for the recipient cannot be due to a ban on agreement coreferent with PP goals. It may instead be due, in descriptive terms, to a hierarchy of agreement preferences, in which the second agreement slot must preferentially target an argumental indirect object, or, if none is present, a direct object.

5. Passive

Passives of ditransitives display interesting complexities.

We begin by establishing a baseline without indirect objects. When a transitive sentence like (26) is passivised (27), the external argument is demoted to an optional *by*-phrase and the object takes on characteristics of a subject, lacking case-marking *n* and controlling subject agreement. A passive morpheme (*tɛ-*) appears on the verb.

(26)   ət- om ʕabɛyti n- ɛt- om k'wɔlʕut məhir-   omm-om
         the-MP adults OBJ-the-MP children teach.PST-3MPS-3MPO
         'The adults taught the children.'

(27)   ət- om k'wɔlʕut (b- ɛt- om ʕabɛyti) tɛ- mahir-   om
         the-MP children by-the-MP adults   PASS-teach.PST-3MPS
         'The children were taught (by the adults).'

Ditransitives can be passivised in two ways. In one, the indirect object retains *n*-marking and continues to govern indirect object agreement on the verb (*nɛti waddi ...-lu*), while the direct object, as in (27), controls subject agreement (*ɛta dimmu ...-atə-*). We treat these passives as involving advancement of the direct object, as per the

translation.

(28) ət- a dəmmu n- ɛt- i wəddi tɛ- ʕadig- atə- lu
the-FS cat OBJ-the-MS boy PASS-buy.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
'The cat was bought for the boy.'

The only surprising feature of this kind of passive is that the indirect object agreement is optional (29). In the active, indirect object agreement is obligatory (15).

(29) ət- a dəmmu n- ɛt- i wəddi tɛ- ʕadig- a
the-FS cat OBJ-the-MS boy PASS-buy.PST-3FSS
'The cat was bought for the boy.'

The other possible passive of ditransitive differs from (28)–(29) both primarily in agreement. In this variety, the verb takes subject and object agreement typical of transitives, with, again, the object of giving, 'cat', controlling subject agreement. (The translation, using an English indirect-object passive, is intended to distinguish from (28)–(29), not to reflect the Tigrinya structure.)

(30) n- ɛt- i wəddi ət- a dəmmu tɛ- ʕadig- at- o
OBJ-the-MS boy the-FS cat PASS-buy.PST-3FSS-3MSO
'The boy was bought the cat.'

It appears to be possible to omit *n*-marking in this passive, though the judgments were not always stable:

(31) ˀət- i wəddi ət- a dəmmu tɛ- ʕadig- at- o
the-MS boy the-FS cat PASS-buy.PST-3FSS-3MSO
'The boy was bought the cat.'

The agreement controlled by the recipient appears to be omissible, but only with case marking on the recipient. It is possible that (32a) is mildly degraded.

(32) a. n- ɛt- i wəddi ət- a dəmmu tɛ- ʕadig- a
OBJ-the-MS boy the-FS cat PASS-buy.PST-3FSS
    b. *ət- i wəddi ət- a dəmmu tɛ- ʕadig- a
the-MS boy the-FS cat PASS-buy.PST-3FSS
'The boy was bought the cat.'

The degrees of grammaticality here are uncertain and require further testing.

Sentences of the type 'The cat came to me' (24)–(25) appear to be more like (30)–(32a) than the earlier passive. For all three sentence types, agreement with the indirect object is optional. However, (24)–(25) and (30)–(32a) both use direct object agreement for the goal. Clearly, further investigation would be useful.

6.   Other ditransitives

Not all ditransitive verbs in Tigrinya behave as described above. At least two use direct, not indirect, object agreement, for the recipient. In (33), with 'tell', 'the girl' is indexed by 3FSO -*a*, not 3FSIO -*la*:

(33)   ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ɛt- a gwal ət- i   tarɪx nɛgir- at- a   / *nɛgir- atə- la
  the-FS woman OBJ-the-FS girl   the-MS story tell.PST-3FSS-3FSO   tell.PST-3FSS-3FSIO

  'The woman told the girl the story.'

Likewise, with 'give' (35), 'the boy' is indexed by 3MSO -*o*, not 3MSIO -*lu*:

(34)   ət- a sɛbɛyiti n- ɛt- i   wəddi ət- a dəmmu hib- at- o   /
  the-FS woman OBJ-the-MS boy   the-FS cat   give.PST-3FSS-3MSO
  *hib-   atə- lu
   give.PST-3FSS-3MSIO
  'The woman gave the cat to the boy'

In both these examples, the direct and indirect objects have opposite genders. So, it is clear that agreement tracks the recipient, as in earlier examples, but does so via direct object agreement, making this look like a 'double object' construction. This difference in verbal morphology does not affect nominal morphology. Consistent with previous examples, the recipient is *n*-marked. Time precluded investigation of the passives of these verbs.

7.   Conclusion

Even this small amount of data has revealed several interesting properties of ditransitive verbs in Tigrinya. Indirect objects gazzump the case marking and agreement slot on the verb that is used for the direct object in simple transitives or when the recipient is encoded as a PP. Depending on the verb, the indirect object may agree via the same agreement forms as direct objects, otherwise, special indirect object agreement forms are used. The latter verbs passivise in two ways, one retaining indirect object

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case marking but loosening indirect object agreement to an option, the other losing case marking and encoding the indirect object via direct object agreement; in both cases, the erstwhile direct object controls subject agreement.

Future documentation should explore these constructions more fully and to equal extents. The Person-Case Constraint, which we investigated briefly and found evidence of, also deserves attention. Given the intricate interplay between lexical case, morphosyntactic case, agreement, and passive, we believe that a theoretical analysis of the facts would be both challenging and enlightening.

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