# THE MORPHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE IMPERATIVE STEM IN AMHARIC

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*Abstract*

*The imperative stem in Amharic may be identified by its selection of a second person subject and by its unique morphological structure. This paper attempts to identify the nature of its core template.*

*In the description of the morphological structure of the imperative stem, a nonlinear model developed in McCarthy (1979, 1981) where the consonantal and vocalic melodies are represented on separate tiers, is adopted. The CV tier is considered to represent an abstract timing slot. The consonantal and vocalic melodies are associated with the relevant unit in the CV tier by the principle of left-to-right association.*

*The Amharic imperative stem is assumed to have a template CCVC for Type A and CVCCC for the Type B and Quadrilateral stems. Epenthesis vowel insertion applies on these basic structures in order to produce pronounceable (surface) forms. The vowel-insertion rule is motivated by a universal process which relates segments within a word with the syllable structure of the language.*

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## Introduction

Imperatives in general have not been given adequate attention. As Davies (1986: Preface) says, they (i.e., imperatives) "are often dismissed as exceptions to some generalization, and linguists have sometimes seemed content to admit that what appear to be parallels between imperatives and other constructions can not be acknowledged as such in their analysis." Linguistic studies in Amharic have failed to give due attention to this category. Even though there are a few works on the subject[1], none of them have ventured to describe its morphology. Teklemariam Fantaye (1971: 65), for instance, says that the imperative may either be in the present or in the future tense and that a direct command is given in the 2nd person. He then goes on to give some examples of the imperative in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd person without specifying its internal structure. Bender and Fulass (1978: 65) consider imperatives as belonging to a "transformational section of the grammar". Recent studies in phonology and morphology, however, have indicated that a transformational account of morphology is unconstrained. As McCarthy (1979: 156) says, any mechanism which employs transformation "would necessarily be capable of any operation on a string of finite length made up of elements of finite vocabulary". In other words, morphological transformations may allow a free movement of segments within a word, reverse strings, replace segments and so on. Hence, the non-transformational approach proposed in McCarthy (1979, 1981) and adopted in this paper is weaker than the transformational approach used in Bender and Fulass (1978) and consequently it is more explanatory.

**Alemayehu H: Structure of the Imperative Stem in Amharic**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and represent the imperative stem formally on a CV prosodic template without resorting to the transformational apparatus. The only principle required in this approach is the usual association with a simple stipulation that the C and V slots are associated with consonantal and vocalic melodies respectively.

**Imperative Stems in Amharic**

The imperatives in Amharic have a morphological structure which distinguishes them from the perfective and imperfective forms. In addition, they also show a restriction on the kind of subject NP they select (in agreement with Teklemariam Fantaye 1971). This is also considered to be one of the characteristic features of imperatives in English (cf. Davies 1986: 6). Amhric imperative forms select only second person subjects. The examples given in (1) below may demonstrate this:

1. a) fällïg "you (masc. sg.) look for something"
   b) gänzäbun mänztru "you (pl.) change money"
      money-def change-you pl.
   c) bärun ztgi "you (fem. sg.) close the door"
      door-def close-you (fem. sg.)
   d) bärun ytzgu "you (pol.) close the door"
      door-def close-you (pol.)

The sentences in (1) would be ill-formed if first or third person subjects were used instead of the second. The specific-subject selection characteristic of the imperative may be related to their morphologically distinct form.[2] This stem is different from that found in verb forms in the perfective and the imperfective aspects. This is shown in the following paradigms:

| **Perfect** (3.m.sg.) | **Imperfect** (3.m.sg.) | **Imperative** (2.m.sg.) |
|---|---|---|
| mänäzzär-ä | yt-mänäzztr-all | mänztr |
| "he changed money" | "he will change money" | "(you) change money" |
| fälläg-ä | yt-fälltg-all | fälltg |
| "he wanted" | "he will want" | "look for(something)" |
| hed-ä | yt-hed-all | hid |
| "he went" | "he will go" | "go" |
| gäddäl-ä | yt-gädl-all | gtdäl |
| "he killed" | "he will kill" | "kill" |
| s'afä | yt-s'tf-all | s'af |
| "he wrote" | "he will write" | "write" |

The examples in (2) show that the perfect stem takes a suffix while the imperfect stem takes a prefix and a suffix. The affirmative imperative does not need any prefix though it may require suffixes as in the case of certain second person subjects (eg. 2nd singular feminine, 2nd plural and 2nd polite).

It seems that it is possible to specify the morphological structure of the verb in the imperative, but to do so, it is necessary to find out the lexical type of the stem in question. It is well known that triliteral verbs in Amharic are divided into two types: Type A and Type B, depending on the behaviour of their medial consonant (cf. Bender and Fulass 1978). Verbs that geminate the medial consonant in all (or most of) the paradigms are referred to as Type B, while those which do so only in the perfective are classed as Type A verbs. In the example given in (2), fälläg-ä and gäddäl-ä are both triliterals, but the former belongs to the Type B set, while the latter is in the set of Type A Verbs. All Type A verbs show morphological patterns for the imperative which underlyingly might be represented as having the following core template:

3) The CV Template of Triliteral Type A Imperative Stems

CCVC

The following are some examples of the imperative forms of Type A stems along with their perfective and imperfective forms:

4)

| Radical (or root consonants) | Perfect 3.m.sg. | Imperfect | Imperative |
|---|---|---|---|
| sbr "break" | säbbär-ä | yt-säbr-all | stbär |
| lk'm "gather" | läk'k'äm-ä | yt-läk'-all | ltk'äm |
| mrt' "select" | märrät'-ä | yt-märt'-all | mträt' |
| lbs "dress" | läbbäs-ä | yt-läbas-all | ltbäs |

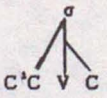
The forms that we get in the imperative do not match one-to-one with the imperative template given in (3).[3]

5)

| | | a) | | | | | b) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Consonant melody tier | → | s | b | | r | | l | k' | | m | |
| Core template | → | C | C | V | C | | C | C | V | C | |
| Vocalic melody tier | → | | t | ä | | | | t | ä | | |

In the above cases, the vowel ä is not associated with an underlying V slot. This mis-match is not difficult to account for if we adopt Hayward's (1986) interpretation of t as an epenthetic vowel[4]. Following his suggestion, the vowel need not be represented in the underlying CV structure, since it is supplied by a rule (see rules (7) and (11)) which is sensitive to the syllable structure of the language. Hayward (1986: 304) says, "Examination of Amharic monosyllables suggest that there are the following syllable types: VC, VCC, CVC, CVCC and very rarely, CV". Consonant clusters which are more than the above sequences cannot be syllabified unless the rule of epenthesis applies. This means that the underlying template given in (3) is unsyllabifiable as shown below:

6)



The first consonant in (6) is not syllabified because Amharic does not allow more than one consonant in the onset position. This makes the initial C' unsyllabifiable or "Extrasyllabic". In such cases, epenthesis may apply and the rule may be represented as follows:

7) Epenthesis Rule

$$\emptyset \rightarrow \dot{t} \;/\; \#\ C' \ -\ C$$

(C' stands for the extrasyllabic consonant)

By this rule, the structure CCVC (i.e., sbär and lk'äm) will be changed to s̈bär and l̈k'äm and this gives the right surface form. The assumption here, therefore, is that the vowel ṫ is not part of the underlying structure but it is inserted by rule (7). According to this assumption, the underlying template of the imperative of a triliteral Type A verb is that which is given in (3) above.

Triliteral Type B and Quadrilateral verbs have identical imperative template as the following examples illustrate:

8)

| **Root Triliteral Type B** | **Perfective** | **Imperfective** | **Imperative** |
|---|---|---|---|
| flg "look for" | fälläg-ä | yṫ-fälḷ̇g-all | falḷ̇g |
| lmn "Beg" | lämmän-ä | yṫ-lämṁṇ-all | lamṁṇ |
| dbk' "hide" | däbbäk'-ä | yṫ-däbḃṭk'-all | däbḃṭk' |

| Quadrilateral Root | Perfective | Imperfective | Imperative |
|---|---|---|---|
| sbsb "collect" | säbässäb-ä | yṭ-säbässṭb-all | säbsṭb |
| mnzr"change money" | mänäzzär-ä | yṭ-mänäzzṭr-all | mänzṭr |
| glbt' "overturn" | gäläbbät'-ä | yṭ-gäläbbṭt'-all | gälbṭt' |

We assume that the underlying structure of the imperative stem of the triliteral and quadriliteral verbs is as follows:

9) CVCCC

Comparing the template in (9) with the actual surface forms in (8) shows a mis-match as indicated in (10) below:

10)

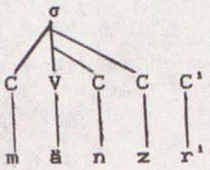
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C-melody tier | → | a) | m | | | n | z | r | | b) | f | | | l | | | g |
| Core template | → | | C | V | | C | C | C | | | C | V | | C | C | C | |
| V-melody tier | → | | | ä | | ṭ | | | | | | ä | | ṭ | | | |

In (10), just as in (5) above, the vowel ṭ has no underlying V slot to associate with. Once again this miss-match can be accounted for by borrowing Hayward's claim that "Amharic has a strict word structure constraint which permits syllables closed by two consonants to occur only in word-final positions" (Hayward 1986: 305). A syllable final cluster of more than two consonants is, therefore, not syllabifiable. This means that the third C after the central vowel (ie. ä) is extrasyllabic. It can only be syllabified after the application of another epenthetic rule which is adopted from Hayward as follows to fit the description given here (see Hayward's rule 29 page 315):

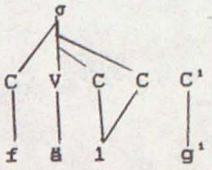
11) $\emptyset \rightarrow \dot{t} \;/\; C - C'$

The surface forms "mänz̈tr" and "fälläg" are arrived at by applying rule (11) to the underlying structure CVCCC.

12) a)




b)

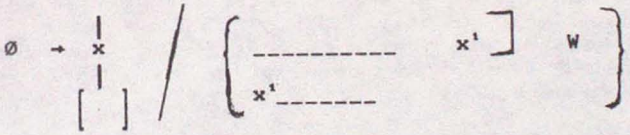



**Rule 11**


Given the epenthetic insertion rule (11), the assumption that the imperative template of the triliteral Type B and the quadriliteral verbs (ie CVCCC) gives the desired result.

In a paper presented at the Linguistic Association of Great Britain (LAGB), Hayward represented the epenthetic rule of Amharic as follows (personal communication):

13) **t-Epenthesis**



ie., if an unsyllabified x' occurs word-finally, it creates a syllable head to its left, otherwise it creates a syllable head to its right.

Rule (13) collapses rule (7) and rule (11) and by so doing captures the general principle underlying the epenthesis rule. It predicts the location of the epenthetic ṭ in both onset and coda positions. The predictability of ṭ is the main reason that suggests that it may not be represented in the underlying template structure.

So far, we have shown two characteristic features that may help to identify the imperative structure and they are the second-person-subject selection restriction and the specific morphological structure depending on the type of the verb[5]. The morphological structure of the imperative, in addition to its specific template, does not take any prefixes. It may have suffixes and one of the suffixes is the subject marker which must obligatorily agree with a second person subject (ie, singular (masculine or feminine)) as shown in (1) above. However, note that the imperative in the negative takes a prefix as indicated below:

14)

| **Affirmative Imperative** | | **Negative Imperative** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| mänzṭr | "change money" | atṭtmänzṭr | "don't change money" |
| fälltg | "look for" | atṭtfalltg | "don't look for" |
| gṭdäl | "kill" | atṭtgdäl | "don't kill" |

The examples in (14) show that the prefix in all cases is not the simple negative marker (al) that we get in the perfective aspect such as:

15)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| gäddäl-ä | "he killed" | al-gäddäl-äm | "he didn't kill" |
| fälläg-ä | "he looked for" | al-fälläg-äm | "he didn't look for" |

The negative marker in (14) is different viz. /att/ rather than /al/. One may suggest that the negative marker has two allomorphs:- /al/ and /att/ and the former occurs with the perfect stem while the latter is found with an imperative stem. This approach, however, does not capture the general characteristics of the negative marker in Amharic. The other approach which we think is more plausible, is that the negative marker is always /al/ and this is what we get underlyingly in the imperative stem too. We assume that the negative imperative takes the second person pronominal prefix /t-/. This affix may be considered to be the same affix which occurs with the imperfective stem as shown below:

16) tṭ-mänäzzṭr-alläh "you (m.sg) will change money"
tṭ-mänäzzṭr-i-allääš "you (f.sg) will change money"
tṭ-mänäzzṭr-allačč̣thu "you (pl.) will change money"

We assume that the negative imperative obligatorily takes the second person pronominal prefix following the negative marker, viz:-

17) al-t-gdäl
al-t-fällṭg
al-t-mänzṭr

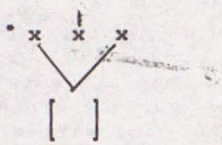
The consonant /l/ assimilates totally with the following consonant (ie. t) resulting in a long or geminate consonant /tt/. The vowel ṭ is introduced by the epenthetic rule discussed above since one of the geminate sounds is extrasyllabic in non-final positions. We only have VC and not VCC as a non-final syllable.

18) *


It is not possible to introduce the vowel ṭ in between the two geminates as the epenthetic rule would predict. This is

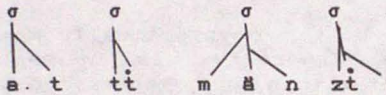
because doing so would mean going against the principle of the integrity of geminates mentioned in Hayward (1986: 316). Hayward says "...geminates could not split in the same way that a cluster could". He said that "Epenthesis is subject to the (universal) Geminate-Integrity-Constraint, Viz:

19)



Hence, the epenthetic vowel, instead of occurring between the two geminates, occurs after them and that gives the right surface result.

20)




= attïmänzïr "you (m.sg.) do not change money"

Thus, it can be said that the imperative may take a prefix only in the negative and not in the affirmative.

**Conclusion**

The two characteristic features (ie. the second person subject selection and the specific morphological (or template) pattern are sufficient to isolate the imperative stem from other verb forms.

## Notes

1. I thank an anonymous assessor for bringing to my attention the need to mention some of the earlier works on the imperatives of Amharic. However, I do not share his/her view that the topic "has been dealt with in greater detail by a number of people". To illustrate the point, the assessor kindly mentioned Hailu Fulass, Hailu and Bender, and earlier works like Obolensky, Deribew and Mulugeta. (He/she did not indicate titles or dates.) In Bender and Fulass (1978), the imperative is not even considered among the regularly found surface forms (viz: Perfect, Contingent, Gerund, Jussive and Infinitive). (see pages 41 and 52). In fact, they say, "The rule for generating imperatives... belongs to a later transformational component of the grammar. The recent generative approach (cf. McCarthy (1979, 1981) Archangeli (1984) among others) is totally against the unconstrained transformational approach such as that used in Bender and Fulass.

Hailu (1980) sets out to give a "syntactically motivated argument to show that the imperative is a sentential complement". His approach falls within the generative-semantics theory which has been greatly revised since Chomsky (1970). Whatever merits and demerits there are in Hailu (1980), the analysis is syntactic and does not contain a morphological analysis of the imperative.

Obolensky, Deribew and Mulugeta (1964) is, as its title suggests, an Amharic basic course book for foreigners. It contains basic sentences and simple texts for students to read and/or memorize. Obviously, it is not in the nature of such elementary teaching materials to provide a detailed grammatical analysis on any linguistic structure including imperatives.

In fact, no linguistic work known to me has been done on the morphological structure of the imperative. This paper tries to fill this gap by adopting the Autosegmental model developed in McCarthy (1979, 1981). Hence, this paper, it is hoped, will contribute to the study of Amharic grammar by giving a description of the morphology of the imperative structure by using the Autosegmental approach.

2. An anonymous assessor says, "one question that comes to mind is the basic definition of imperative stems in terms of the subject they select,... instead of other criteria such as their morphological, syntactic and semantic structures". It must be stated here that the purpose of this paper is to analyze the morphological structure and to specify the CV pattern of the imperatives. It appears that the pattern CCVC and CVCCC for Type A and for Type B and Quadriliteral stems respectively provide the template and thereby supply the morphological criterion necessary to identify the imperative stem. A syntactic criterion may not be necessary here because, according to the Principle of Lexical Integrity, the internal structure of words is "opaque to syntax" (Booij 1985: 143). A semantic criterion is not given in this paper simply because the concentration is on morphology and not on semantics. Such an analysis may be given in future research.

3. In the association, we use McCarthy's (1979: 138) Consonant Association Principle where autosegments (or consonant melodies) are "associated from left-to-right with appropriate slots of the template". The principle also applies to the association of vowels with vocalic melodies.

4. The vowel ɨ which occurs in the surface phonological structure of the imperative is an epenthetic vowel which is introduced to break a cluster of two consonants and more than two consonants on the onset and code positions respectively. The same principle is used in Bender and Fulass (1978: 65) where an initial cluster breaking rule is represented as follows:

Initial Cluster Breaking Rule

S.D. # [+obs, +grv] [+cons, -obs, -nas]

S.C 1 2 3

1 2i 3

b) S.D. # [-syl] [-syl, -flu]

S.C. 1 2 3

i 2i 3

Bender and Fualass (1978: 65) say:

Part (a) of the rule provides the possibility of Cl or Cr in word initial position provided that C is one of the grave obstruents g, k', k, f, b, p', p. Part (b) disallows any other cluster involving anything other than w as a second member.

The above rules, which are represented in a linear approach do not provide a motivation for the epenthetic vowel insertion except that they stipulate that a vowel be inserted in between the two word initial consecutive consonants. The analysis given in this paper, which is adopted from Hayward (1986), eventhough it relies on the rule of epenthetic vowel insertion just as in Bender and Fulass (1978), tries to describe the phenomenon from the point of view of syllable phonology. The integration of such type of analysis into phonological theories is proposed by many researchers (see Clements and Keyser 1983 and the references therein). A Universal theory of syllable, among other things, "must characterize the class of language particular rules which modify or extend the underlying syllable representations ("syllabification rules") and state how these rules are integrated into the general organization of the phonological component" (Clements and Keyser 1983: 25).

Hayward (1986) follows the syllable based approach and gives a better explanation to epenthetic vowel insertion than Bender and Fulass (1978) in that it provides a motivation for the application of epenthesis. He uses a universal principle which is much easier to apply than any ad-hoc or idiosyncratic rule.

In this paper, as in Hayward (1986), epenthesis is accounted for as a "function of the universal process which relates morphologically-structured segmental strings with syllable structures. (See the Universal Form of Syllable Formation in Clements and Keyser (1983: 74-75). The representation here is, therefore, based on a more refined model than Bender and Fulass's" (1978) and consequently it provides an adequate explanation to epenthetic vowel insertion rule.

5. The derivation of irregular imperative forms such as **hid** "(you) go" and **rut'** "you run" etc. Will be discussed in Alemayehu Haile and R.J. Hayward (in preparation).

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