

ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF AMHARIC VERBS: A PERSONAL VIEW

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Verbs are the most important elements of a language. They have the most important function in the sentence structure which cannot be replaced by any other linguistic element. The first task of anyone learning a language should be to study verbs because without them there is no complete sentence. In learning a language, it is essential to group verbs into classes characterized by similar linguistic features in order to study them easily and efficiently.

Amharic verbs differ in the number of consonants and the conjugation types. Even if there might be other linguistic aspects to classify verbs, the number of consonants and the conjugation type are sufficient to classify Amharic verbs.

Several linguists studied the verb system of Amharic. For instance, Trommer (2008) introduced three classes for triradical verbs and two classes for quadriradical verbs in Amharic. The reason for his focus on triradical verbs seems to be that most Amharic verbs are triradical (see also Baye 1999: 64). In contrast, Appleyard (2003: 236) proposed an additional verb class of biradical verbs. For a detailed overview on the classification of Amharic verbs, see Leslau (1995:280–287).

A single verb, ሻ ሻa 'want, wish' (Richter 1987: 135), forms the monoradical verb group, which is often excluded in the discussions of Amharic verbs. But for a comprehensive study, all verbs occurring in a language must be considered. For the classification of Amharic verbs, the imperfect and the imperative/jussive conjugations must be taken into account, as well as the consonants and their subsequent vowels.

The following classification is intended to provide an initial insight into all verb classes in Amharic by providing sample verbs in the third person singular masculine perfect.

Class A – Monoradical Verb

The single verb in this class has only one consonant: ሻ ሻa (to wish, want). There is no other verb in this class.

Class B – Biradical Verbs

This class consists of verbs with two consonants whose initial consonants are followed by the vowels *ä*, *a*, *e*, or *o*. Their final consonants may be followed by *ä* or *a*. These verbs can be categorized into two subclasses: geminated and non-geminated verbs.

Subclass B1 – Geminate Biradical Verbs

This subclass contains verbs whose final consonants are geminated and which are followed by the vowels *ä* or *a*. The vowels that follow the initial consonants can be *ä*, *a* or *o*.

Examples:

ቀረ *qärrä* (to remain behind, be absent)
ለየ *läyyä* (to separate, differentiate, identify)
ፈጠረ *fäččä* (to grind)

በለ *bälla* (to eat)
ጠና *ṭanna* (to be strong)
መጣ *mätta* (to come)

ለጠረ *laččä* (to cut off, shave)
ቆየ *qoyyä* (to wait, stay long)

In the imperfect, the vowels following the initial consonant do not change. But in the imperative/jussive, they become *ə* with *qärrä* and *bälla*.

<i>qärrä</i>	Imperfect: <i>yə-qära-ll</i>	Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-qər</i>
<i>bälla</i>	Imperfect: <i>yə-bäla-ll</i>	Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-bla</i>
<i>laččä</i>	Imperfect: <i>yə-lačča-ll</i>	Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-lačč</i>
<i>qoyyä</i>	Imperfect: <i>yə-qoyya-ll</i>	Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-qoyy</i>

B2 Non-Geminated Biradical Verbs

This subclass contains the verbs with two non-geminated consonants. The initial consonant can be followed by the vowels *e* or *o*. The final consonant is followed by *ä*.

Examples:

ለለ <i>lasä</i> (to lick)	ቆመ <i>qomä</i> (to stand)
ሳበ <i>sabä</i> (to pull)	ጠተ <i>motä</i> (to die)
ጻፈ <i>šafä</i> (to write)	ጸመ <i>šomä</i> (to fast)

ሄደ *hedä* (to go, walk)
ጠሰ *ṭesä* (to smoke)
ጌጠ *geṭä* (to beautify)

The vowels *e* in *hedä* and *o* in *qomä* do not change in the imperfect, whereas the vowel *a* in *lasä* changes to *ə* in this conjugation. The final vowel becomes *a* and is followed by the ending *-ll*.

In the imperative/jussive, the vowels *e* and *o* following the initial consonant become *i* and *u*, respectively, as shown with *hedä* and *qomä*. The vowel *a*, as in the verb *lasä*, remains unchanged.

Examples:

<i>lasä</i>	Imperfect: <i>yə-ləsa-ll</i>	Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-las</i>
<i>hedä</i>	Imperfect: <i>yə-heda-ll</i>	Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-hid</i>
<i>qomä</i>	Imperfect: <i>yə-qoma-ll</i>	Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-qum</i>

Class C – Triradical Verbs

This Class C consists of verbs with three consonants. Their final consonants are usually followed by the vowel *ä*. The medial consonants are often geminated. The verbs could be classified into two groups according to their initial consonant.

C1 Verbs Beginning with Plain Consonants

The verbs belonging to this sub-class keep their initial consonant-vowel combination unchanged in all conjugations. The medial vowel changes to *ə* in the imperfect and imperative/jussive.

Examples:

መገብ <i>mäggäbä</i> (to feed)	Imperfect: <i>yə-mäggəba-ll</i> Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-mäggəb</i>
ባረከ <i>barräkä</i> (to bless)	Imperfect: <i>yə-barrəka-ll</i> Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-bark</i>
ጥከረ <i>mokkärä</i> (to try, test)	Imperfect: <i>yə-mokkəra-ll</i> Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-mokkər</i>

Note that in the case of *barräkä*, there is no gemination in the imperative/jussive.

C2 Verbs with an Initial Labialized Consonant (ቈ *q^w*, ከ *k^w* and ገ *g^w*)

The reason to put the verbs with a labialized first consonant into a sub-class is mainly due to the change of the vowel *ä* following the initial labialized consonant to the vowel *ə/ø* in the imperative/jussive, which contrasts with the verbs under the subclass C1.

Examples:

ቈረሰ <i>q^wärräsä</i> (to cut into pieces)	Imperfect: <i>yə-q^wärsa-ll</i> Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-q^wräs</i>
ገዳሉ <i>g^wäddälä</i> (to be incomplete)	Imperfect: <i>yə-g^wädla-ll</i> Imperative/Jussive: <i>yə-g^wdäl</i>

Class D – Quadriradical Verbs

Verbs with four consonants form a class on their own. In most cases, their third consonant is geminated.

Examples:

ገለበጠ *gäläbbäṭä* (to turn over, copy)

መሠረተ *mäsärrärä* (to establish)

ገነጠለ *gänäṭṭälä* (to detach)

In the imperfect and imperative/jussive, the vowel remains the same after the initial consonant.

The derived causative and passive forms of regular verbs, as well as their derived reciprocal stem are not included here, as productive derivation should be treated separately.

Class E – Quint-Radical Verbs

This verb class contains verbs with five consonants.

Examples:

ተጨማለቀ *täçämalläqä* (to be rude)

አቆላመጠ *ገaqqolammäṭä* (to call friendly)

ተንሰራፋ *tänsäraffa* (to spread)

It should be noted here that this class does not consist of verbs productively derived in the passive or causative derivation, as it was the case with class D. The sample verbs above do not have another base form, even if they begin with the elements ገa- and t-.

Class F – Additional Verb Classes

This class contains verbs with more than five consonants such as ተንደላቀቀ *tändälaqqäqä* (to be lexical) and አንከባለለ *ገankäballälä* (to let roll down).

This general classification of the Amharic verbs is helpful for learning their conjugations and derivations, since the verbs within a single group have common features. However, the verb classes presented here provide only a small insight into the Amharic verb classification.

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