

The Structure of Grammar Teaching in Amharic: The Relative Clause and Its Dimension

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In my presentation, I will first present a basic list of grammar topics to be covered in an Amharic course for foreign language learners. Then, I will discuss some general problems related to their sequencing and the effect of different native language backgrounds (L1) of the learners and the use of relatively complex expressions almost from scratch. The latter point will be discussed using the Amharic relative clause as an example.

Copula sentences with a relative clause are very dominant due to their high frequency in spoken Amharic. Therefore, these clauses should be included even at the beginner level (A1–A2). But copula and relative clauses require at least a basic morphological knowledge of the conjugations of the copula and verbs in both the perfective and imperfective aspects. In my opinion, the acquisition of Amharic relative clauses could start with learning a limited number of them as lexical entities (e.g., የት ነው የምትኖረው? lit. 'Where is it that you (M) are living?' – የምኖረው ፓሪስ ነው:: 'That I live is (in) Paris.' / ከየት ነው የመጣሽው? 'From where is it that you (F) came?' – ከሎንደን ነው የመጣሁት:: 'It is from London that I came.'). When learners are more familiar with the verb conjugations, the basic structure of the relative clause could be explained. First, the relative verb prefixes የ- (perfective) የም- (imperfective) will be explained. Then, the strategies for relativizing subjects (2) and direct objects (3), later for the relativization of adverbial constituents (4), and finally for marking the function of relative clauses in the matrix sentence (e.g., accusative marking in 4) will be discussed.

1. Basic sentence

አልማዝ አዲሱን ተማሪ ትላንትና አየችው::

'Almaz saw the the student yesterday.'

2. Relativized subject

አዲሱን ተማሪ ያየችዋ ሴትዮ አልማዝ ነች::

'The woman who saw the new student is Almaz.'

3. Relativized object

አልማዝ ያየችው አዲሱ ተማሪ ጎበዝ ነው::

'The new student whom Almaz saw is clever.'

4. Relativized adverbial

አልማዝ አዲሱን ተማሪ ያየችበትን ቀን አልረሳሁትም።

'I did not forget the day on which Almaz saw the new student.'

This would suggest that the acquisition of the relative clause – and consequently the structure of the Amharic grammar – will be a process that unfolds over several semesters and learner levels. It will proceed from overt to more complex structures.