

How tense is encoded in embedded imperfective clauses? A case study from Amharic control

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Amharic syntacticians agree that Amharic has two major aspects, perfective and imperfective (Dawkins 1960, Beyene 1973, Leslau 1995, Demeke 2003, *a.o.*). The two aspects are morphologically distinguishable in that perfective markers are always suffixed to the verbal stem (with a set of inflected phi-features) (1a), whereas imperfective markers are both prefixal and suffixal (1b). Syntactically, the occurrence of a bare perfective verb is sufficient in root clauses. On the other hand, imperfective verbs must be further suffixed by a tense (e.g. past or non-past) auxiliary (2). Semantically, the perfective expresses a complete or inherently past event, whereas the imperfective can widely cover continuous, progressive, habitual and future events. The semantic distinction can be shown by the selection of temporal adverbs (see examples in (3)).

The asymmetry between the two aspects with regards to the use of tense auxiliaries is neutralized in subordinate and embedded clauses. Depending on the semantics, subordinate/embedded clauses must be marked by a corresponding clausal marker (CM) (see some examples in (4)). Moreover, they ban the use of an auxiliary even though the embedded aspect is imperfective (which otherwise requires a tense auxiliary in root clauses). Since tense auxiliaries are informative of the temporal specification of the imperfective verb (3b,c), the ban on auxiliaries in embedded clauses gives rise to a puzzle of how the temporal reading of imperfective verbs in the embedded clauses can be obtained. In this paper we focus on one embedded imperfective structure, namely, control structures formed by the modal CM *li-* which roughly means ‘about to’ or ‘in order to’. We call this structure *li*-control (5). To begin with, Amharic embedded predicates/T in *li*-control are fully inflected for phi-features, and moreover the phi-features must concord with that of the matrix predicate/T (6). Second, while Amharic is a pro-drop language, the embedded subject of the *li*-control clause must be a PRO since it does not alternate with overt pronouns or other lexical NPs (7), whereas pro can by nature alternate with overt pronouns (8). However one salient property *li*-control is that it is incompatible with the semantics of partial control (Landau 2004). All instances of *li*-control are exhaustive control, whereas the semantic of partial control must be expressed by another CM *ʔindi-* (as a typical complementizer; Amberber 2010) which heads a declarative clause (9). Since Landau argues that the split between exhaustive/partial control is closely tied to the (semantic) tense feature of the embedded clause (10), the observation that Amharic *li*-control does not demonstrate the same partial/exhaustive split should have an immediate consequence on the tense feature of the control clause. We argue that the semantic tense feature of the control clauses in Amharic is determined by the semantic type of control predicate which is mediated by the modal CM *li*. In some contexts, the temporal specification can be (though not always) dependent on that of the matrix predicate such as *mokärä* ‘try’ (11). Other matrix predicates, e.g. *tämäñä* ‘wish’, cannot override the temporal specification of the irrealis embedded clause (12). As a result, it is the combination of the semantic type of the control predicate and the CM *li-*, but not the partial/exhaustive control split, which determines the embedded tense feature. Amharic embedded imperfective clauses in *li*-control are reminiscent of irrealis infinitives (Stowell 1982). We claim that the function of *li-* is compatible with Wurmbrand’s (2014) suggestion of the modal operator *woll* in English future infinitives, and *li-* is the morphological realization of *woll*. The function of *li*-/*woll* is to bind an event variable in the future infinitive clause (13) (note: *woll* can combine with a PRES/PAST morpheme to spell out as *will/would*, respectively). The ban on overt tense auxiliaries in *li*-control clause can be described by *li-* as conflating a PAST/PRES morpheme and the modal operator *woll*.

- (1) a. *käbbädä hedä-Ø*. [perfective]
Kebede leave.perf-3smS ‘Kebede left/has left.’
b. *käbbädä yi-bäl-Ø-all-Ø*. [imperfective]
Kebede 3smS-eat.imperf-3smS-aux-3smS ‘Kebede eats/is eating.’
(2). *käbbädä yi-bäla-Ø* *(näbbär).

- Kebede 3smS-eat.IMPF-3smS AUX.PST ‘Kebede was eating.’
- (3) a. kābbädä <tinant/?ahun/*nägä> hedä-Ø. [perfective]
Kebede yesterday/now/tomorrow leave.PF-3smS ‘Kebede left <yesterday/now/*tomorrow>.’
- b. kābbädä <*tinant/?ahun/nägä> yi-bäl-Ø-all-Ø. [present imperfective]
Kebede yesterday/now/tomorrow 3smS-eat.IMPF-3smS-AUX.NPST-3smS
- c. kābbädä <tinant/*?ahun/*nägä> yi-bäla-Ø näbbär. [past imperfective]
Kebede yesterday/now/tomorrow 3smS-eat.IMPF-3smS AUX.PST
- (4) a. [Lämma wädä amerika ?indä headä-Ø] näggärä-čč-iñ. [declaratives]
L. to America CM go-3smS told-3sfS-1sS “She told me that L. went to US.”
- b. [almaz kü-mät’t’a-cc] alämu yi-hed-Ø-all-Ø. [conditionals]
Alm. CM-come.perf-3sfS Ale. 3smS-go.imperf-3smS-aux-3smS ‘If Alm. comes, Ale. will go.’
- c. gäbäre-w [asa mä-yaz] y-awk'-all-Ø. [nominal clause]
farmer-det fish CM-catch 3smS-know-aux-3smS “The farmer knows catching fish.”
- d. zinayä [wididir-u-n li-t-aʃänif-Ø] tämäñä-č. [control]
Z. match-def-acc CM-3sfS-win-3sfS wish.perf-3sfS “Z. wished to win the match.”
- (5) a. ?ihte [li-t-mät’a] fällägä-čč.
siter-poss CM-3sfS-come.imperf-3sfS want.perf-3sfS “My sister wanted to come.”
- b. Kābbädä [almazi-n l-i-räda-Ø] täsmama-Ø.
K. Alm.-acc CM-3smS-help.imperf-3smS agree.perf-3smS “K. agreed to help Alm.”
- (6) a. zinayä [li-t-aʃänif-Ø] tämäñä-č.
Zinaye CM-3sfS-win.imperf-3sfS wish.perf-3sfS “Zinaye wished to win.”
- b. *zinayä [l-y-aʃänif-Ø] tämäñä-čč.
Zinaye CM-3smS-win.imperf-3smS wish.perf-3sfS
- (7) zinayä [(?iswa) li-t-aʃänif-Ø] fällägä-č.
Zinaye 3sf CM-3sfS-win.imperf-3sfS want.perf-3sfS “Zinaye wanted to win.”
- (8) (?ine) hed-ku.
1s leave.perf-1s “I left.”
- (9) Kābbädä [ʔand lay bä-6 ?ind-i-mät’a-u] tämäñä-Ø.
Kebede together on-6 CM-3plS-come.imperf-3plS wish.perf-3smS
“Kebede₁ wished that they_{2/1+} came together at 6.”
- (10) Partial control complements are tensed; Exhaustive control complements are untensed.
- (11) a. tinantina Kābbädä [l-i-hed-Ø] mokärä-Ø.
yesterday Kebede CM-3smS-go.imperf-3smS try.perf-3smS “Yesterday Kebede tried to go”
- b. *tinantina Kābbädä [nägä l-i-hed-Ø] mokärä-Ø.
yesterday Kebede tomorrow CM-3smS-go.imperf-3smS try.perf-3smS
- (12) a. tinantina Kābbädä [l-i-hed] tämäñä-Ø.
yesterday Kebede CM-3smS-go.imperf-3smS wish.perf-3smS
“Yesterday Kebede wished to leave (at some time).”
- b. tinantina Kābbädä [nägä l-i-hed] tämäñä-Ø.
yesterday Kebede tomorrow CM-3smS-go.imperf-3smS wish.perf-3smS
“Yesterday Kebede wished to leave tomorrow.”
- (13) Leo decided [woll_i [e_i to sing in the shower]_{eventive}]

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