

ABHANDLUNGEN FÜR DIE KUNDE
DES MORGENLANDES
Band 107

Time in Languages of the Horn of Africa

Edited by
Ronny Meyer and Lutz Edzard



Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft
Harrassowitz Verlag

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DES MORGENLANDES

Im Auftrag der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft
herausgegeben von Florian C. Reiter

Band 107

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2016

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet
at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

For further information about our publishing program consult our
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Printed on permanent/durable paper.
Printing and binding: Hubert & Co., Göttingen
Printed in Germany
ISSN 0567-4980
ISBN 978-3-447-10745-7
e-ISBN PDF 978-3-447-19445-7

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Editors' Preface

The grammatical expression of time – tense and aspect – is a well-established field of study in linguistic typology. Since Comrie's (1976; 1985) seminal work, various facets of tense and aspect, and their interrelationship have been researched, e.g. in Dahl (1985), Bybee (1985), Sasse (1991), Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca (1994), Bhat (1999), Binnick (1991; 2012), among others.

In typological approaches, TENSE is considered a deictic category that relates the verbal EVENT (e.g. state, action, etc.) to a reference point, usually the moment of speaking, which results in the putative three-way tense distinction between present, past and future. Many languages, however, only distinguish between two values, viz. past vs. non-past or present vs. non-present; a few languages have more specific tense values, like, e.g. near vs. remote past, definite vs. indefinite future, etc. Markers for tense often grammaticalize from lexical elements (e.g. auxiliary verbs) or aspect markers, and thus have a very generalized semantics that does not interact with the semantics of the verbs to which they are attached.

Markers for aspect behave differently. GRAMMATICAL or VIEWPOINT ASPECT, i.e. basically the two-way distinction between perfective vs. imperfective expressed through verb inflection, is not a deictic category but represents the speaker's view on a verbal event. The perfective aspect emphasizes the inherent (potential) boundaries of an event, which often co-occurs with a past reading, whereas the imperfective aspect highlights the ongoing phase following the initial point or preceding the end point of an event. The imperfective aspect has various pragmatic interpretations, including that of a continuative or progressive, iterative, habitual, or general present. Certain temporal phases of a verb can also be encoded by periphrastic constructions or verb derivation, which consequently function as expressions for a specific PHASAL ASPECT. Finally, the inherent temporal structure of a verb, its LEXICAL ASPECT, is construed through a combination of the semantic features dynamicity, durativity and telicity yielding the well-known four-way distinction between states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements.

Despite the long-lasting and diversified cross-linguistic interest in tense/aspect, most grammatical descriptions of Cushitic, Ethio-Semitic, Nilo-Saharan, and Omotic languages spoken at the Horn of Africa do not deal in much

detail with the expression of time. Often, only a summary of inflectional verb paradigms (which as often as not are entirely based on elicited data), and their approximate translations into English or other languages are provided. Not much is said about the origin of these paradigms, their meaning range, discourse function, and semantic interaction with each other, or with time adverbials. For other language families, however, comprehensive studies on tense/aspect are available, e.g. Dahl (2000) for European languages, or Nurse (2008) for Bantu languages.

In order to develop a better understanding of time concepts in languages spoken at the Horn of Africa, and to gain new insights in typological and areal-linguistic issues related to the expression of time in these languages, Ronny Meyer (Addis Ababa University), Lutz Edzard (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and University of Oslo), Yvonne Treis (CNRS/LLACALAN, Paris), and Ewa Wolk-Sore (University of Warsaw) organized the panel “Time in the Languages of the Horn of Africa” at the 19th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, which took place from 24–28 August 2015 in Warsaw under the theme “Ethiopia – Diversity and Interconnections through Space and Time”.

The panel presentations had an unintentional bias towards Ethio-Semitic, to which nine of the fourteen presentations were devoted. Four papers were concerned with Cushitic languages, but only one with an Omotic language. Two research topics dominated the presentations: in-depth studies on tense/aspect systems of individual languages, and typological contrastive comparison of specific tense/aspect features in closely related languages. All of the eight contributions in the present collective volume emerge from the panel presentations and the subsequent discussions.

The first section of the present volume consists of five contributions dealing with tense/aspect phenomena in individual Ethio-Semitic languages. Maria Bulakh investigates the interplay between the lexical semantics of Gə‘əz stative verbs and their temporal meaning (implication) in the three basic verb conjugations for the perfective and imperfective aspect, and the converb. She argues that stative verbs in Gə‘əz belong to two broad semantic classes, viz. inchoative-stative verbs and verbs that denote a continuous event with potential starting and end points.

Fekede Menuta outlines the main features of grammatical time expressions in Gumer, a little-known Gurage variety of the Chaha-group (Central Western Gurage). The contrast between the perfective and imperfective viewpoint aspect is the central feature of verb inflection. Gumer, furthermore, grammaticalized periphrastic auxiliary constructions to denote a future event without speci-

fic modal implications vs. a less probable future (or past) event. Tense marking is also found in the derivation of certain time adverbs, which occur in pairs of complementarily forms for past or future events.

Two contributions are concerned with particular parts of the Amharic tense/aspect system. Magdalena Krzyżanowska describes the interface of tense/aspect with epistemic modality in complex predicates containing the invariable auxiliary *yə-hon-all* (3SM-be(come))_{IPFV-AUX.NPST}, i.e. the 3SM imperfective of the inchoative-stative verb *honä* ‘be(come)’ followed by the non-past auxiliary *allä*. Epistemic modality is concerned with the speaker’s evaluation of the degree of validity of a given proposition, which involves two temporal reference points: (i) the moment of the speaker’s assessment of a proposition, and (ii) the time of the event denoted by the proposition. The auxiliary *yəhonall* combines with three types of co-verbs, which all are dependent verbs syntactically, viz. plain verbs in the imperfective or converb (traditionally called “gerund”) conjugation, or derived progressive forms consisting of a verb in the perfective conjugation marked by the prefix *əyyä-*. The co-verbs convey aspectual meaning, but also code a relative tense with the moment of the speaker’s epistemic assessment as reference point. The moment of the epistemic assessment typically coincides with the moment of speaking, but can also be the past in narrative texts. There is no formal distinction between them.

The other contribution with a sole focus on Amharic is Derib Ado’s *Metaphors of time in Amharic*, which is not concerned with the grammatical coding of tense/aspect, but with the pragmatic extension of time concepts in metaphorical expression. After a general overview about frequent time metaphors in Amharic, such as TIME IS AN OPPONENT, CONTAINER, LOAD, RESOURCE, Derib Ado concentrates on the metaphor TIME IS SPACE and its various facets. Time in Amharic is dominantly conceptualized on a two-dimensional horizontal axis, on which ego faces the future, whereas the past is behind him. On this axis, time, as well as ego might move, commonly from the future to the past. The reverse direction, past to present/future, only occurs in imaginary discourse about past events.

The last contribution in this section – and the only one on a language not belonging to the Ethio-Semitic family – is Shimelis Mazangia’s account of tense/aspect in the Cushitic language Oromo, more precisely its Eastern or Hararghe variety (with additional comparative data from the Western or Wallagga Oromo variety, and Amharic). Oromo verbs primarily inflect for the perfective and imperfective aspect, which denote several semantic sub-categories. Only prospective and continuous events are marked by periphrastic con-

structions, which usually are based on copula clauses. It is assumed that verbs in the two primary conjugations conflate aspect with tense by default, thus past perfective vs. non-past imperfective. However, they also denote events with the respective other time reference, so that they most probably are unmarked for tense. Specific time reference is commonly marked by adverbs, or temporal auxiliaries. A distinct past auxiliary can optionally refer to a habitual event in the past, or mark past reference in periphrastic constructions (e.g. the prospective or progressive). Another auxiliary derived from the verb ‘exist’ primarily emphasizes the continuity of an event (in the past or non-past). Secondly, this existential auxiliary is developing into a non-past marker, as can clearly be seen in the Wallagga variety. It grammaticalized the combination of converb plus auxiliary as separate construction denoting the perfect, in which the past perfect contains the past auxiliary, but the present perfect the existential auxiliary. The Hararghe variety, in contrast, includes the perfect reading within the semantics of the perfective.

The remaining three contributions are comparative studies of tense/aspect phenomena in various Ethio-Semitic languages. Lutz Edzard’s contribution is an in-depth study of experiencer constructions and impersonal verbs in Ethio-Semitic (with focus on Amharic) from a Semitic and general typological perspective. He shows that these constructions most frequently denote bodily sensations in Ethio-Semitic (or more specifically Amharic), but rarely include verbs of perception. The grammatical encoding of the experiencer (agent-like through subject suffixes vs. patient-like through object suffixes) supports the cross-linguistic hierarchies for control and affectedness.

Based on a corpus of Hebrew news texts, which were translated into Amharic and Tigrinya, Olga Kapeliuk contrastively compares the occurrence of specific Amharic and Tigrinya verb forms. Although the two Ethio-Semitic languages are structurally similar, there are major differences in the use of auxiliary verbs in main-clause predicates. As a result, identical translations into Amharic and Tigrinya are rather few in number. The Amharic texts are more fluent and follow closer the Hebrew source, while the Tigrinya texts tend to be more complex, and to contain longer sentences.

In the last contribution, Ronny Meyer deals with the grammaticalization of tense in Ethio-Semitic by comparing the structure and function of main clause predicates in Gə‘əz, Amharic, and Muher. Tense as a grammatical category distinguishing between past vs. non-past is an innovative feature in modern Ethio-Semitic. It emerged as an optional feature in Gə‘əz, probably first in copula clauses, and then diffused to main clauses with an imperfective verb. Subse-

quently, tense became an inherent part of periphrastic constructions, mainly the perfect, proximative and progressive. These constructions are limited to main clauses, as subordinate predicates usually only express viewpoint aspect but not tense.

A few recurrent issues can be observed in the multitude of tense/aspect phenomena discussed in the individual contributions. Stative verbs in Ethio-Semitic languages apparently belong to two or more semantic sub-classes (Bulakh; Kapeliuk; Edzard; Meyer). Their lexical semantics always includes a potential (initial) boundary, i.e. total-stative verbs seem to be completely absent, or to be quite rare at least.

The primary temporal feature, marked through the basic verb conjugations, is viewpoint aspect, i.e. the binary distinction between perfective vs. imperfective. This conclusion is supported by two phenomena: First, stative verbs in the perfective conjugation have by default a present reading, but can also have a past implication in marked contexts, as shown in the contributions by Bulakh; Edzard; Kapeliuk; Meyer. Second, (plain) imperfective main-clause verbs are typically interpreted as non-past events, but can also refer to the past (cf. Shimelis; Meyer). Thus, the tense interpretation of the two basic conjugations interacts with the lexical aspect of verbs, and may vary depending on the discourse context, which is a strong indicator that they mark aspect, not tense.

Grammatical tense is usually marked through temporal auxiliaries to distinguish past from non-past events (cf. Fekede; Shimelis; Kapeliuk; Meyer). Commonly, a distinct past auxiliary combines with imperfective verbs, or is part of periphrastic constructions (including the perfect) in affirmative main clauses. Non-past in these types of predicates, however, is often not overtly marked, but simply indicated through the absence of the past auxiliary. Although the existential verb/copula (which initially might have emphasized ongoing events) may develop into a non-past auxiliary, its combination with an imperfective verb may still retain a tense-neutral continuous reading in certain contexts. Therefore, complex predicates consisting of an imperfective co-verb and the existential auxiliary can also refer to past events, as observed in Amharic (for which cf. also Krzyżanowska) and Oromo.

The perfect seems to be an innovative grammatical category, which is typically a complex predicate consisting of a converb (or converb equivalent) as co-verb and a temporal auxiliary (which can also be a zero marker through the contrast with an overt past auxiliary). Initially, the perfect reading was certainly part of the perfective conjugation (cf. Bulakh; Shimelis; Meyer). But then the perfect grammaticalized as a separate morphosyntactic form, and apparently

became a feature of the Ethiopian language area, which may be absent in peripheral varieties, as clearly shown in Shimelis' comparison of the perfect in Hararghe vs. Wallagga Oromo. On the other hand, the two distinct morphological categories for the perfective and the perfect may again merge into a single form, namely that of the innovative perfect, as can be observed in Gunnän Gurage (cf. Fekede; Meyer).

It should be noted that the transcription of linguistic data has not been unified in the collective volume, i.e. representations according to IPA occur side-by-side with specialized (Ethio-)Semitic transcription systems (sometimes even for the same language). Therefore, a single sound might be transcribed variously, but it is consistently represented in the individual contributions.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the NORHED project *Linguistic Capacity Building: Tools for the Inclusive Development of Ethiopia* (jointly conducted by Addis Ababa University, Hawassa University, the University of Oslo, and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology) for providing financial support to the panelists from Ethiopia, the University of Oslo for its technical support, and the organizing committee of the 19th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies for hosting our panel.

Addis Ababa and Erlangen/Oslo,
October 2016

Ronny Meyer and Lutz Edzard

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On Static Verbs in Gə'əz

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1 Introduction

In most works on lexical aspect, STATES are established as a special class of situations, contrasting with other classes such as ACTIVITIES (for an overview cf. Filip 2011:1189, 1193, 1197, 1202, etc.). Verbs denoting states may differ in their morphosyntactic behavior from language to language and within one language.

Breu (1988:45) – adopted in Sasse (1991:5) and Breu (1994:25) with some terminological modifications – offers a consistent classification of verb meanings based on the boundary characteristics of situations.¹ He distinguishes between totally static verbs (TSTA) and inceptively static verbs (ISTA). While totally static verbs do not presuppose any temporal boundaries for the denoted situation, an initial limit is probable for inceptively static verbs. Furthermore, there is a class of situations, which allow for both initial and final limits, the so-called activities (ACTI).² Albeit the term ACTIVITY implies a non-static meaning, the class of ACTI-verbs in fact includes many situations traditionally seen as states, such as *sitting* or *being ill* (cf. Breu 1994:32; Gvozdanović 1994:144). Thus, a label without reference to the static-active opposition, like, e.g. INCEPTIVE-TERMINATIVE, would have been more appropriate. Nevertheless, in the present contribution, the term ACTI is retained as conventional label. Accordingly, I will speak of “static ACTI-verbs”, despite the oxymoronic character of such a collocation.

It must be emphasized that Breu's classification operates with situations as they are conceptualized in a given language, i.e. the same verbs may belong to different classes in various languages (Breu 1994:32). Thus, a formal distinction between the semantic verb classes on morphological or syntactic criteria is not universal (Sasse 1991:6).

1 In the present contribution, the terminology of Breu (1994) is used.

2 The remaining two semantic classes – gradually terminative and totally terminative verbs – are beyond the scope of the present investigation.

The present contribution will discuss the morphosyntactic behavior of a number of Gəʻəz verbs denoting states, as in Table 1:

Table 1 Gəʻəz static verbs

BASIC STEM *qatla* TYPE

STRONG ROOTS	C ₂ =SEMIVOWEL	C ₂ =GUTTURAL
<i>ʔabda</i> ‘be mad’	<i>ḥaywa</i> ‘live’	<i>dəḥna</i> ‘be safe’
<i>ʔamna</i> ‘believe’	<i>noḥa</i> ‘be tall; high’	<i>nəʔsa</i> ‘be small’
<i>ʕabya</i> ‘be big’	<i>qoma</i> ‘stand’	
<i>kabda</i> ‘be heavy’	<i>noma</i> ‘sleep’	C ₂ =GUTTURAL
<i>nagša</i> ‘reign’	<i>šora</i> ‘carry’	<i>bazḥa</i> ‘be numerous’
		<i>šanša</i> ‘be strong’
		<i>šalʔa</i> ‘hate’

BASIC STEM <i>qatala</i>-TYPE	BASIC STEM <i>qatla/qatala</i>-TYPE	CAUSATIVE STEM
<i>ḥadara</i> ‘reside; dwell’	<i>ḥamma/ḥamama</i> ‘be in pain’	<i>ʔafqara</i> ‘love’
	<i>qarba/qaraba</i> ‘be near’	<i>ʔaʔmara</i> ‘know’

The verbs in Table 1 were randomly selected from a list of verbs whose meaning is cross-linguistically associated with static situations. In addition, some well-known Gəʻəz verbs whose meaning is apparently conceptualized as static have been included. The majority of these verbs are of the *qatla* type (admittedly, some of them are verbs with a guttural as last radical, which allow only the *qatla* type in the basic stem).³ Of course, this is only to be expected, as the *qatla* type is associated with a static meaning.⁴ The verb *ḥadara* is certainly not the only verb of the *qatala* type with a static meaning, i.e. it is just by accident that no other static verbs of this type have been included. However, the causative stem, primarily employed for the causative derivation, typically refers to non-static situations. Consequently, static verbs in this stem are not numerous.

In the discussion of the morphosyntactic features of these static verbs, I will focus on the interplay between their lexical meaning and the inflectional mor-

3 Note that for the two verbs allowing variation between *qatla* and *qatala*, the latter form is marked as rare in Dillmann (1865:72, 425).

4 Cf. already Dillmann (1907:142), where the *qatla* type is claimed to denote “participation, not in pure doing, but either in suffering or in mere condition”; see also Lambdin (1978: 50).

phemes *qatala*, *yəqattəl*, and *qatilo*.⁵ Some attention will be paid to the employment of the *qatala* form with static verbs to refer to a present situation (cf. §3.3.2). On the basis of the attested textual employment, it will be argued that there are two types of static verbs in Gə'əz: The verbs of the first type denote either a state or its beginning (and thus, are to be classified as ISTA-verbs), while the verbs of the second type denote a state, its beginning, or the whole situation from the beginning to the end (and thus, are to be classified as ACTI-verbs).

I have deliberately excluded negative forms and predicates of conditional sentences from the investigation. In conditional sentences, there is a tendency to employ verbs in the *qatala* conjugation in the protasis, but in the *yəqattəl* conjugation in the apodosis (see, e.g. Tropper 2002:245). Thus, the verb form is syntactically rather than semantically motivated. In negation, the opposition between the perfective and imperfective meanings could be neutralized (see Miestamo and van der Auwera 2011). As will be shown in §2, this opposition is crucial for understanding the behavior of static verbs in Gə'əz.

The majority of the cited examples come from the Gə'əz Bible and the apocrypha, either quoted in Dillmann (1865), or found in a searchable online collection of Biblical Gə'əz texts.⁶ The relevant contexts are quoted according to Dillmann (1853; 1861; 1894); Esteves Pereira (1989); Mercer (1931); Gleave (1951); Bachmann (1893); Wechsler (2005); Zuurmond (1989; 2001); Knibb (1978); VanderKam (1989); and Perrone and Norelli (1995). Devens's (2001) concordance to the *Gə'əz Psalms* and Lusini's (2003) concordance to the *Ascension of Isaiah* were consulted as well. Examples for early post-Aksumite Gə'əz are taken from the *Kəbra Nagašt* (Bezold 1905) and the *Chronicle of 'Amda Šəyon* (Kropp 1994).⁷

For a comprehensive description, certainly more verbs have to be examined, including an exhaustive analysis of their contextual usage. This task cannot be

5 Following Weninger (2001), I use *qatala*, *yəqattəl*, and *qatilo* as shorthand label for the basic verb conjugations and their respective grammatical function: *qatala* instead of the traditional term perfect (i.e. perfective), *yəqattəl* instead of imperfect, *qatilo* instead of gerund (or converb). The form *qatilo* is only briefly discussed because it is rare in comparison with *qatala* and *yəqattəl*, and I failed to collect a large number of relevant contexts. The discussion of the *qatilo* forms in §3.4 is based on examples from Weninger (2001). Other inflected verb forms, like the jussive, imperative and infinitive, are not considered.

6 Accessible at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~hacohen/Biblia.html>.

7 I am most grateful to A. Bausi for providing me with a searchable digital version of these two texts.

easily fulfilled without a concordance for a large number of Gə'əz texts differing in genres and time of creation. Still, it is to be hoped that the present contribution will help to advance our knowledge on static verbs in Gə'əz.

2 Some remarks on the verbal system of Gə'əz

In a research on lexical verb classes, special attention should be paid to the interaction between the semantics of a verb and its various grammatical meanings. Therefore, one has to say some words on the basic grammatical oppositions in the verbal system of Gə'əz. The crucial question is whether it is primarily aspect-oriented or tense-oriented. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on this question up to date. In 2001, a special monograph by S. Weninger appeared, which explored in detail the various functions of all major verb conjugations in Gə'əz. Weninger (2001:313, 319) evaluates the main opposition of the Gə'əz verbal system, viz. the opposition between *qatala* and *yəqattəl*, as relative tense: *qatala* marks the relative past (“relative Vorzeitigkeit”), while *yəqattəl* expresses the relative present (“relative Gleichzeitigkeit”). In Tropper (2002:181, 182, 186), this analysis is abandoned in favor of an aspectual interpretation: *qatala* is described as perfective, and *yəqattəl* as imperfective (cf. also Cohen 1989:190; Meyer 2016 (this volume)).

In view of this dissent, it is necessary to summarize the generally accepted facts about the *qatala* and *yəqattəl* conjugations, and to assess their compatibility with temporal and aspectual interpretations. The *qatala* conjugation is primarily used in sentences about past situations. The examples with apparent reference to the present time in Weninger (2001:75–88) are to be explained either as performative verbs (as duly acknowledged by Weninger), or as inference about a present state resulting from a change of state in the past (cf. §3.3.2). Furthermore, *qatala* appears in (relatively few) sentences about future situations (Weninger 2001:88–95).⁸ In such contexts, Weninger’s analysis of *qatala* as expressing relative past, i.e. as a situation preceding in time another reference situation, is indeed highly convincing. However, a similar employment of the perfective aspect is also known from other languages. In general, the distribution of the time reference of *qatala* – default past time reference, lack of present time reference, restricted future time reference – corresponds to what can be expected from a verb conjugated for the perfective aspect (cf. Dahl

8 The so-called *perfectum propheticum*, which could also belong here, is a mechanical translation of the *Vorlage* (i.e. original forms) in most contexts (cf. Weninger 2001:97–98).

1985:79–80). As for *yəqattəl*, it is used in sentences about past, present and future situations (Weninger 2001:103–156).⁹

Now, what aspectual value can be ascribed to *qatala* and *yəqattəl*? In sentences about the past time, *qatala* is apparently the default form. The employment of *yəqattəl* in such sentences can plausibly be interpreted as expression of the imperfective meaning, which is hardly in contradiction with Weninger's (2001) evaluation of *yəqattəl* as relative present tense (cf. Dahl 1985:24–25 on the difficulty of distinguishing between imperfective and relative present tense). In sentences about the present time, the imperfective interpretation of *yəqattəl* is practically the only possible one. In sentences about the future, *yəqattəl* can describe both bounded and unbounded situations (cf. the examples in Weninger 2001:143–150; Tropper 2002:186–187), but this may be explained as neutralization of the opposition between imperfective and perfective. All in all, the interpretation of *yəqattəl* as imperfective does not contradict the facts.

More problematic is the employment of *qatala*. Is it really restricted to bounded situations? At first glance, the answer seems to be *no* – in view of four passages quoted by Weninger (2001:73–74) in which *qatala* seems to refer to continuous or habitual situations in the past. However, for each of the cited examples, a perfective interpretation cannot be excluded.¹⁰ The most convincing argument for the non-perfective employment of *qatala* is Weninger's (2001:73) example No. 109, which is given in (1).¹¹

9 This distribution – one form limited to the past, and the other with no time restrictions – is not unlike that of Modern Written Arabic, which is analyzed by Comrie (1976:78–81) as combining tense and aspect oppositions. However, the verbal system of Modern Written Arabic is treated in Dahl (1985:155) as aspect opposition, and the same analysis is applied to the system of Classical Arabic (Cohen 1989:183). The fact that the perfective most frequently occurs in sentences about the past is typologically predictable (cf. Dahl 1985:79, Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994:83).

10 The verb *rassaya*, in Weninger's (2001:73) example No. 110, might designate an individual action: *rassaya ħurato* 'he took up the course'. Example No. 111 involves an apodosis of an unreal conditional sentence, and hence does not provide strong evidence for a specific aspectual interpretation (cf. §1). For the perfective interpretation of example No. 112, cf. example (77) in Appendix 3.

11 The first line in the examples from the corpus of epigraphic Gə'əz is a quotation from RIÉ, with the following modifications: The RIÉ transliteration has been adapted to the system used in the present paper, i.e. RIÉ *ḏ* and *š* are replaced with *ṣ̣* and *ṣ̣̣*, respectively. The RIÉ symbol /, which represents a word divider, is replaced with |. In examples from unvocalized inscriptions, the second line (marked with two asterisks **) contains a hypothetical reconstruction of the vocalization. If the Epigraphic Gə'əz orthography deviates from that of Classical Gə'əz, the underlying forms (marked by the symbol <) are given in round brackets. Square brackets indicate damaged fragments, which are re-

(3) *wa-ʔəla~ʔəla* | *ʕarazna* | *ʔahazna* | *wa-moqaḥna*
 and-REL.P~DIST pierce\PFV:1P take\PFV:1P and-put_in_fetters\PFV:1P
 ‘and **we took** and **put in fetters** all those whom **we pierced**’
 (RIÉ 187:10)¹⁴

(4) *wa-qatalu* | *za-rakabu*
 and-kill\PFV:3PM REL.SM-find\PFV:3PM
 ‘and **they killed** (all) whom **they met**’ (RIÉ 187:19)

(5) *wqtlm* | *mnm* | *škbm*
 ***wa-qatalna-m* *mann-a-m* *rakabna-m*¹⁵
 and-kill\PFV:1P-MIM who-ACC-MIM find\PFV:1P-MIM
 ‘and **we killed** whoever **we met**’ (RIÉ 190:10-11)

(6) *wqtlm* | *wšwwm* | *zškbm*
 ***wa-qatalu-m* *wa-šewawu-m* *za-rakabu-m*
 and-kill\PFV:3PM-MIM and-take_captive\PFV:3PM-MIM REL.SM-find\PFV:3PM-MIM
 ‘and **they killed** and **took captive** whoever **they met**’ (RIÉ 190:18)

Each of the examples (1)–(6) implies a kind of distributive, marked either by the distributive prepositions *lalla-* and *babba-*, or by the relativizer in the singular or in the distributive plural (***ʔəlla-ʔəlla-*). In such a syntactic context, the *qatala* form denotes a single action within a chain of repeated actions: ‘we killed each man that we met’, ‘in the course of each day he gave them such and such quantity of wheat’, etc. Thus, none of the examples can be seen as a true argument in favor of a non-perfective employment of *qatala*.¹⁶ However, no *yəqattəl* forms are attested in Epigraphic Gəʿəz to describe a habitual or iterative situation in the past. Thus, it remains unclear what was the usual way of expressing such a meaning in Epigraphic Gəʿəz.

ten in South Arabian script (cf. Sima 2003/2004:276–277), a word-final *-m* is inserted indiscriminately after nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc. as an imitation of the Sabaic mimation of nouns, on which final *-m* expresses the indeterminate state (cf. Stein 2011: 1051).

14 In the examples from vocalized inscriptions, the transliteration of RIÉ is preserved.

15 Note that the South Arabian graphemes for *r* and *š* are sometimes confused in RIÉ 190 because of their graphic similarity (cf. Schneider 1974:769).

16 Moreover, the perfective is used in iterative or habitual contexts in some languages (Dahl 1985:79).

The comparison of *Gə'əz qatala* forms with the verbs in the *Vorlage* yields ambiguous results. The usual correspondence between the Greek aorist – generally accepted as an exponent of the perfective (cf., e.g. Comrie 1976:19; Sasse 2002:203; Bary 2009:11) – and *Gə'əz qatala* (cf. Hofmann 1969:79; 1977:245) may be seen as an argument in favor of perfectivity for *qatala*. Within this approach, one would expect that the Greek imperfect – with the semantics of the imperfective in the past – would be consistently rendered with *Gə'əz yəqattəl*. This, however, is not the case, at least not exactly. The Greek imperfect is often rendered with *yəqattəl* into *Gə'əz*, but examples of corresponding *Gə'əz qatala* are found as well (cf. Hofmann 1969:79; 1977:245). Can one discard them as stylistic amendments by the translator? Or should one, on the contrary, treasure such examples as true indications of *qatala* used with an imperfective meaning?¹⁷

The material of the present investigation provides an additional argument in favor of the aspectual interpretation of the *qatala* vs. *yəqattəl* opposition. It turns out that the apparent polysemy of static verbs in *Gə'əz* – for most of which the dictionaries record two invariants, a static and an inceptive one – can be plausibly explained as result of the interaction between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect. The extant text examples can be analyzed in terms of a complementary distribution between the static and inceptive meanings of one verb: the former appears in the *yəqattəl* form, whereas the latter is associated with *qatala*. Such a distribution agrees with the aspectual interpretation of the respective forms. It is well known that static verbs often change their meaning to an inceptive reading in the perfective aspect (cf. Comrie 1976:19–20; Breu 1988:47; Smith 1997:70).¹⁸ Admittedly, there is no ultimate evidence for an inceptive reading of *qatala* with static verbs. Many examples are ambiguous and allow both inceptive and static readings. Nevertheless, an analysis that implies an exact correlation between form and meaning and, moreover, has a theoretical rationale, seems highly attractive. Therefore, I adopt the aspectual interpretation in the present investigation, in the hope that further development of *Gə'əz* studies will reveal decisive arguments in its favor.

17 Cf. the discussion of example (15) in §3.3.1.

18 Cf. also Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca (1994:92), where a related phenomenon – present time reading of static verbs in the perfective aspect – is discussed as an important criterion to distinguish between perfective and simple past. As we shall see in §3.3.2, in *Gə'əz* one cannot speak of the *obligatory* present time reading. Rather, it emerges as an implicature from the past inceptive.

3 Static verbs in Gə'əz

3.1 Are there total static verbs in Gə'əz?

Among the verbs in Table 1, there are several designations of qualities or permanent states which could be expected to belong to the totally static verb class (TSTA). Meanings such as 'be big', 'be small', 'be long, high', 'be heavy', 'be numerous', 'be near', 'be mad', 'be strong' may be thought to be associated with situations typically unchangeable, without any implication of a beginning or an endpoint. For instance, the meaning 'be small' does not necessarily presuppose a beginning, a process of *becoming small* (unlike 'know', which typically implies that the situation of knowing was preceded by a process of acquiring the knowledge).

However, it turns out that formal criteria do not allow establishing a TSTA verb class in Gə'əz. It is quite difficult to find verbs that only denote static situations (the only reliable example is the locative and existential copula *hallo/hallawa*). Even a cursory perusal of Leslau's (1987) comparative Gə'əz dictionary reveals that for verbs which denote qualities – 'be red', 'be big', 'be small', 'be heavy' – one usually finds, along the definition "to be X", the definition "to become X" (of course this phenomenon is not restricted to Gə'əz; cf. Cohen 1989:58–59 for other Semitic languages).¹⁹ As a result, their syntactic behavior is quite similar to verbs like 'love', 'know', 'believe', 'hate', which predictably belong to the inceptively static class.

To illustrate this phenomenon, let us consider the verb *ʕabya* 'be big'. Logically, a state 'be big' does not necessarily presuppose that the object in question *became big* at a certain moment of time. A statement that a mountain *is big* does not imply that this mountain *became big* some time ago. However, the verb *ʕabya*, besides the static meaning 'be great, be big, be large, be important' (Leslau 1987:55); 'magnum esse' (Dillmann 1865:985), can be used with the inceptive meaning 'increase (itr), become fat, swell' (Leslau 1987:55); 'cres-cere, magnum vel majorem fieri' (Dillmann 1865:985), as examples (7) and (8) show.

19 In some cases, the change from the static meaning to the inceptive one is accompanied by an additional semantic shift. For instance, for the verb *haywa* 'live', the inceptive realization is 'come back to life, revive (itr)', often more specifically 'be cured, recover' (cf. Leslau 1987:252).