

Morphosyntactic Structures of Existential, Possessive and Locative Constructions in Amharic

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Abstract: This paper lays out the morphosyntactic structures of existential, locative and possessive constructions in Amharic. Amharic belongs to South Ethio-Semitic language subfamily. It is natively spoken in the Amhara region and used as the first and the second language for some urban dwellers in the country. It is a working language for the Federal Government of Ethiopia. It serves the same in Gambella, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' and Benishangul-Gumuz regional states. The Amharic existential, possessive and locative constructions are characterized by using the same existential verb stem *all-* 'exist'. The verb is defective in its derivation and conjugation. Unlike the prototypical verbs of the language, the existential verb uses a different verb for imperfective and past verb forms. Unlike the regular verbs of the language, the existential verb, which is perfective in form, conveys present tense. It has been observed that indefinite nominals appear as the E (Existent) in existentials and possessives, whereas definite ones appear in locatives. The morphosyntactic features of existentials and locatives are the same in every aspect except the use of definiteness of the E (Existent). The possessives differ from the two constructions in word order and morphological structure of the verb.

Keywords: root, radical, existence, location, possession, morphosyntactic structures, Amharic

1. Introduction

Amharic belongs to the South Ethio-Semitic language subfamily under the Ethio-Semitic language phylum. It is natively spoken in the Amhara region (Gojjam, Gonder, Wello and Shewa) of the country. It is also spoken in Addis Ababa, the capital far and wide. The language serves as a working language for the Federal Government of Ethiopia and in Gambella, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' and Benishangul-Gumuz regional states. In other regional states of the country, it is spoken as a second language.

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This paper analyses existential, locative and possessive constructions in Amharic. The existential, locative and possessive predicates are all expressed with the same verb stem *all-* ‘exist, have, available’ as exemplified in the following examples.

- (1) a. *tānakaš wišša all-ä.*
wild dog exist-3MS.s
‘There is a wild dog.’
- b. *tamari-w i-kifil wist’ all-ä.*
student-DEF in-class inside exist-3MS.s
‘The student is in the class.’
- c. *Kasa mäs’haf all-ä-w.*
Kasa book exist-3MS.s-3MS.o
‘Kasa has a book.’

The examples in (1a-c) represent existential, locative and possessive constructions respectively. Note that in the existential and locative constructions (1a & b), the verb bears the subject agreement suffix *-ä* only, while in possessive (1c), it bears the subject suffix *-ä* and the object agreement suffix *-w*.

What motivates treating these three constructions in this single paper is that they use one irregular predicative verb stem for their respective functions. Since these constructions share the same verb stem, their construction is expected to be related, if not the same. Accordingly, it seems plausible to make a case that there are three existence functions in Amharic: the existence, locative and possessive. Thus, structures with the verb stem *all-* can variously be translated as ‘exist’, ‘found in/at’ and ‘have’. That is, existential, locative and possessive functions are expressed by the respective constructions.

The relation between existential, locative and possessive constructions has long been noted cross linguistically (Clark, 1978; Freeze, 1992; Lyons, 1967). The constructions are related even using different copulative or existential verbs (Clark, 1978; Freeze, 2001). This idea was first proposed by Lyons (1967) who observed that the existential function of the verb ‘to be’ in English could not occur without a locative complement. He then claims that “all existential sentences are at least implicitly locative.” Following this, the constructions have been considered locational constructions (Clark, 1978). According to Clark, the constructions are strongly related, not only because they share the same verb, but also because they are locational in origin. In her study, Clark (1978) articulates the view that existential, locative, and possessive constructions are all subclasses of “locational constructions”.

Along this line, Freeze (1992, 2001) states that locationals are all transformed from a common D-structure. Put it another way, existential, possessive and locative constructions are derived from the same underlying locative structure. Likewise Zeitoun et al. (1999:2)

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state that although existential and possessive constructions show some syntactic and semantic differences from locative constructions, they are locative in nature.

Wang & Xu (2013) in their part taking in constructions of different languages, claim that locationals are similar or related to one another in word order, in case marking, and in the choice of their predicative verbs.

Although the idea that expresses existential, possessive and locative constructions are derived from one source is widely known in the literature, there are also alternative views that counter argue this premise (Payne et al., 2018; Błaszczak, 2007:6; Langacker, 2009; Dryer, 2007) *inter alia*.

Contrary to Freeze's (1992) analysis, Błaszczak (2007), for instance, argues that existential, locative and possessive constructions "are not derived from the same underlying structure, but each involve a different base structure".

Based on the data from Nivacle and Pilagá languages, Payne et al. (2018), also express that "locative predications do not universally underlie possession predications." The researchers further argue that the data from "Nivacle and Pilagá display greater affinity between their so-called non-verbal EXISTENTIAL and POSSESSIVE constructions than between their LOCATIVE and POSSESSIVE ones". Likewise, Langacker (2009) affirms that possessive and locative constructions are not exactly one and the same.

On the basis of diverse morphosyntactic behavior of African languages, Heine (1997) suggests that possessive constructions could have a range of "source schemas" from which they are derived out of which location is the only one.

On the other hand, Kim (2013) argues that owing to some semantic correspondences observed between copular and existential constructions, researchers have been inclined to derive the existential construction from the copular one through transformation rules like the 'There-insertion'.

These divergences of arguments among researchers, therefore, would be the source of interest to examine the morphosyntactic behavior of Amharic existential, possessive and locative constructions and see which category of the arguments it supports.

The paper addresses basic issues, namely the irregular conjugational paradigm of the verb, the syntactic properties of the existential, locative and possessive constructions and show how the form and function of the constructions partly overlap and are partly distinct.

The paper, therefore, examines both the morphological and syntactic properties. It is mainly descriptive, and no theoretical analysis is developed. However, it is anticipated that the discussion and the data revealed will give a signal of a wider theoretical and typological interest of the constructions being considered.

The paper is organized into four sections. Section 2, describes the morphological or lexical structure of the verb *all-*. Section 3 analyzes the syntactic behavior of the construc-

tions in question. In section 4, the syntactic and semantic relations of the constructions are addressed. Section 5, offers the conclusion by recapitulating the entire discussion.

2. Morphology

Sooner than getting into the discussion on the constructions under consideration, it is to be practical to present a very brief general background about the morphosyntactic behavior of Amharic verbs, which I believe, helps out in looking at the irregularities of the predicative verb, *all*^①, of the constructions.

Amharic verbs are derived from consonantal roots (predominantly triradical roots). Vowels are inserted between radicals to derive different verb forms and express suggestive meanings. The following are examples of perfective, imperfective and jussive verb stems derived from their respective roots.

Root	Perfective	Imperfective	Jussive	
<i>s-b-r</i>	<i>säbbär-</i>	<i>-säbr</i>	<i>sibär</i>	‘break’
<i>g-d-l</i>	<i>gäddäl-</i>	<i>-gädl</i>	<i>gidäl</i>	‘kill’
<i>k-mm-r</i>	<i>kämmär-</i>	<i>-kämmir</i>	<i>kämmir</i>	‘pile up’
<i>f-ll-g</i>	<i>fälläg-</i>	<i>-fällig</i>	<i>fällig</i>	‘desire’
<i>m-s-k-r</i>	<i>mäsäkkär-</i>	<i>-mäsäkkir</i>	<i>mäskir</i>	‘testify’
<i>m-h-r-k</i>	<i>marräk-</i>	<i>-marrik</i>	<i>mark</i>	‘take captive’

As can be learnt from the above table, the verbs derived from the roots *s-b-r* ‘break’ and *g-d-l* ‘kill’ geminate their penultimate radicals in their perfective forms only. Verbs with this derivational behavior are categorized as type ‘A’ verbs. On the other hand, the root *k-mm-r* ‘pile up’ and *f-ll-g* ‘desire’ geminate their penultimate radicals in all their derivatives. Verbs having this characteristic are type ‘B’. The last two examples show roots that geminate the penultimate radical in their perfective and imperfective forms. These roots are known by the type ‘C’. Note that the roots are quadrilateral. In the case of *m-h-r-k* ‘take captive’, the second radical /h/ is deleted and resulted in the vowel /a/ next to the first radical.

In Amharic, infinitival stems, which relate to verbal nouns, are derived from the jussive and/or perfective prototype verbal stems with the prefix *mä-* as shown in the following examples.

Root	Jussive /Perfective	Infinitival	
<i>s-b-r</i>	<i>sibär</i>	<i>mä-sibär</i>	‘to break’
<i>g-d-l</i>	<i>gidäl</i>	<i>mä-gidäl</i>	‘to kill’

^① In Amharic, the third person, masculine, singular (3MS) verb form is used as a citation. Since the verb *allä* appears as 3MS verb form, it is used as the citation form when it appears as a lexical entry.

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<i>f-ll-g</i>	<i>fälläg-</i>	<i>mä-fälläg</i>	'to desire'
<i>k-mm-r</i>	<i>kämmär-</i>	<i>mä-kämmär</i>	'to pile up'

Note that the first two infinitival forms are derived using the jussive stem as a base, whereas the last two are derived using the perfective stem.

Verbs, which have lost their ultimate radical of their respective root, will have the sound /t/ in the same position as a compensation as in the following examples.

Root	Infinitival	
<i>l-kk-ʔ</i>	<i>mä-läkkat</i>	'to measure'
<i>b-l-ʔ</i>	<i>mä-bilat</i>	'to eat'
<i>s-t'-w</i>	<i>mä-sit'ät</i>	'to give'
<i>w-s-y</i>	<i>mä-waš'ät</i>	'to lie'

In these examples, since the ultimate radicals /ʔ/, /w/ and /y/ of the respective roots are lost; the compensatory /t/ appears at the final position of the corresponding derived infinitival forms.

In their inflectional paradigm, Amharic verbs bear agreement affixes. The agreement affixes identify subject and object NPs in the features of person, number and gender. Perfective and gerundive verb stems have suffix subject pronoun affixes, whereas imperfective stems bear prefixes as shown below.

		Perfective	Imperfective	Gerundive
SG	1	<i>-ku/-hu</i>	<i>i-</i>	<i>-e</i>
	2M	<i>-k/-h</i>	<i>ti-</i>	<i>-h</i>
	F	<i>-š</i>	<i>ti- -i</i>	<i>-š</i>
	3M	<i>-ä</i>	<i>yi-</i>	<i>-o</i>
	F	<i>-äčč</i>	<i>ti-</i>	<i>-a</i>
PL	1	<i>-n</i>	<i>in-</i>	<i>-än</i>
	2	<i>-aččihi</i>	<i>ti- -u</i>	<i>-aččihi</i>
	3	<i>-u</i>	<i>yi- -u</i>	<i>-äw</i>

Unlike the subject agreements, the object agreements are suffixes invariably and appear only with transitive verbs following the subject agreement suffix. The object agreement suffixes are the following.

	Singular	Plural
1	<i>-ññ</i>	<i>-n</i>
2M	<i>-h</i>	<i>-aččihi</i>
F	<i>-š</i>	
3M	<i>-w</i>	<i>-aččäw</i>
F	<i>-at</i>	

The last issue worth mentioning is the negative form. Prototypical verbs derive their

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negative counterparts by the negative prefix *al-* as exemplified below.

<i>säbbär-</i>	<i>al-säbbär-</i>	‘did not break’
<i>gäddäl-</i>	<i>al-gäddäl-</i>	‘did not kill’
<i>kämmär-</i>	<i>al-kämmär-</i>	‘did not pile up’
<i>fälläg-</i>	<i>al-fälläg-</i>	‘did not desire’
<i>marräk-</i>	<i>al-marräk-</i>	‘did not take captive’

This general background information about the regular verbs of the language assists us to clearly see how the verb stem *all-* ‘exist’ deviates from the morphosyntactic properties of the regular verbs of the language. In view of that, in what follows I shall focus on the mismatch it shows in the derivation, tense and negative forms.

As shown above, the verbs, in Amharic, are derived from triradical and quadriradical consonantal basic roots as in *s-b-r* ‘break’ and *m-s-k-r* ‘testify’. The verb in question, however, surfaces with the initial vowel /a/ followed by the middle radical /ll/. This means, it does not have the prototype derivation paradigm. The first attempt should be to find its underlying basic root and explain how it gets the surface form. In Amharic, when radicals are missed on the surface forms of verbs, the missed radical shows up in other sub-verb forms or in their nominal counterparts. The verbs *azzän-* ‘be sad’ and *mal-* ‘vow’ for instance, have lost the radical /h/ from initial and medial positions respectively. The missed radical, however, appears in their respective nominal counterpart *hazän* ‘sorrow’ and *mähalla* ‘oath’. In the case of *all-*, as it has no any sub-verb, nominal or adjectival counterparts derived from the same basic root, it is hardly possible to find clue to get the missed radical. This is one of the idiosyncrasies of the verb.

The other option to get any sort of hint is to check a cognate word in sister languages. For instance, the Amharic verb *mätʔ-* ‘came’ has lost its ultimate radical /ʔ/. The missed radical shows up in the cognate verb *mäsʔiʔ-* in Tigrinya. Correspondingly, in Argobba, the closest sister language of Amharic, the equivalent verb form for *all-* is *hill*, which gives us a putative evidence that the Amharic *all-* had the initial radical /h/. In another sister language, Geez, the equivalent verb is *halläw-*. This form proves two things. First, what is proposed about the initial radical is attested. Secondly, it gives us the clue that the ultimate radical was /w/. Based on these facts, it is possible to propose that the verb has lost its initial radical, /h/ and the final radical, /w/. This in turn leads us to plausibly take as fact that the verb has the underlying root *h-ll-w*^①. Following the regular triradical verb

^① In his article entitled ‘the verb to have in Amharic’, Baye (1997) suggests the same underlying root. He further supports his proposal by saying “the verb has underlying root form, *h-ll-w*, is also evident from the form of its nominal counterpart *hilliw-nna* ‘existence’ in which all the three radicals show up”. My argument here is the nominal counterpart *hilliw-nna* does not substantiate the proposed underlying root for

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derivation paradigm of the language, the perfective verb stem form would have been *hälläw-*. However as the initial and final consonants are lost, what is left on the surface is the penultimate radical only.

The next problem to be addressed is how the missing of the two radicals result in the surface verb stem *all-*. To take up this issue, it is important to go over the phonological processes observed when radicals are deleted in the language. It is a common phenomenon to see the missing radicals change the neighboring consonant and vowel quality. The verbs *mas-* ‘dig’, *hed-* ‘go’ and *mot-* ‘die’, for instance, have lost their medial radicals /h/, /y/ and /w/ respectively. That is why the verbs have the vowels /a/, /e/ and /o/, which do not go with *cäccäc-* pattern we have seen above for triradical perfective verb stems. Accordingly the deletion of the initial radical /h/ changed the central vowel /ä/ to the low vowel /a/, which resulted in the /a/ of *all-*. Likewise the missing ultimate radical /w/ should have changed the preceding central vowel to the rounded vowel /o/ as in *mot-* ‘die’. Nevertheless, the missing of the ultimate radical has not left any phonological trace. Consequently the verb stem appears as *all-*.

The other irregularity of the verb stem is revealed in verb conjugation. As pointed out earlier, the verbs in Amharic show different forms for different verb stems like imperfective, jussive, gerundive, etc. On the contrary, the verb *all-* does not have any derivation analogous to the regular verbs discussed above. The verb does not have imperfective, jussive, gerundive verb stems derived from the basic underlying root. Instead the verb uses a different verb stem, *nor-*, for these conjugations. Consider the following table.

		Imperfective	Jussive	Gerundive
SG	1	<i>i-nor-</i>	<i>li-nur</i>	<i>nor-e</i>
	2M	<i>ti-nor-</i>	<i>nur</i>	<i>nor-äh</i>
	F	<i>ti-nor-i</i>	<i>nur-i</i>	<i>nor-äš</i>
	3M	<i>yi-nor-</i>	<i>yi-nur</i>	<i>nor-o</i>
	F	<i>ti-nor-</i>	<i>ti-nur</i>	<i>nor-a</i>
PL	1	<i>inn-nor-</i>	<i>inn-nur</i>	<i>nor-än</i>
	2	<i>ti-nor-</i>	<i>nur-u</i>	<i>nor-aččihu</i>
	3	<i>yi-nor-</i>	<i>yi-nur-u</i>	<i>nor-äw</i>

These forms are used for the functions expressed by the existential verb *all-*. For instance, the imperfective stem *-nor-* ‘exists, will exist’ is used, as follows.

- (2) a. *nägä* *sibsäba* *yi-nor-all*
tomorrow meeting 3MS.s-exist-AUX.PRES

Amharic; because the nominal is not Amharic origin. It is a Geez nominal found in Amharic by borrowing. Hence, all what it manifests is about Geez not about Amharic.

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‘There will be a meeting tomorrow.’

b. *i-bet* *ti-nor-all-äčč*
in-house 3FS.s-exist-AUX.PRES-3FS.s

‘She will be at home.’

c. *bet* *yi-nor-äññ-all*
house 3MS.s-exist-1S.o-AUX.PRES

‘I will have a house.’

Based on what has been observed about the roots and the verb derivations of the language, it is possible to presume that the verb stem *nor-* is derived from the underlying root *n-w-r* ‘exist’, which is completely different from the underlying root *h-ll-w* of *all-*.

This defective nature of the verb brings about a difficulty to classify the verb in either of the above mentioned verb types (type A, type B, type C) without doubt. Since there is no tangible evidence from its derivation in Amharic, it is worthwhile to seek information from related languages. In this regard, the cognate verb *halläw-* ‘exist, have’ in Geez is type ‘B’ verb (Tropper, 2002; Meyer, 2016). This undeniably assists us to plausibly consider *all-* as type ‘B’ verb.

Tense and aspect are closely connected in Amharic^①. The perfective aspect is associated with past tense whereas the imperfective aspect is with non-past. With regard to the verb stem *all-*, it has the perfective form, but unlike the regular verbs, it expresses simple present tense. The question that follows could be how we know that the stem is perfective. The only plausible verity to consider *all-* as perfective form is that it is a suffix conjugation verb. That is, it employs suffix agreements only, which characterizes perfective verbs. Since the verb expresses simple present tense, the next question will be how does it express simple past tense. The verb uses another verb *näbbär-* ‘there was’ for simple past tense. Hence, the answer for the question also attests its irregularity. Consider the simple past forms in (3) below.

(3) a. *zare* *sibsäba* *näbbär-(ä)*
today meeting exist.PAST-3MS.s

‘There was a meeting today.’

b. *i-bet* *näbbär-äčč*
in-house exist.PAST-3FS.s

‘She was at home.’

c. *bet* *näbbär-ä-äññ*
house exist.PAST-3MS.s-1S.o

^① Regarding the category aspect and tense in Amharic, there is no consensus among researchers. To mention some, Poláček (1972) and Dahl (1985), treat Amharic as a tense language, whereas Girma & Meyer (2001) consider it as aspect based.

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‘I had a house.’

On the whole, unlike the properties of the verbs in the language, the verb *all-* employs completely different verbs for imperfective verb form and simple past tense.

As shown above, the negative perfective verb stems are derived using the negative prefix *al-*. In so far as the verb stem *all-* is a perfective stem, it is expected to have a negative form *al-all-*. This form, however, is not acceptable. Unlike the regular verbs of the language, the verb has a negative form *yällämm* ‘there is no’. In this negative form, the negative prefix is *yä-*, which has no relation with *al-*.

When the verb is in a subordinate clause or when it is with a complementizer such as *silä* ‘because, the fact that’, *indä* ‘in accordance with’, etc. the negative prefix will not remain *yä-*, rather, it will be *-le/-lä-*. Compare the following negative main clause (4a-b) and subordinate clause (4c-d) structures.

(4) a. *zinab yällämm.*

zinab *yä*^①-*all-ä-mm*
rain NEG-exist-3MS-NEG
‘There is no rain.’

b. *i-bet yä-all-äčč-imm*
in-house NEG-exist-3FS-NEG
‘She is not at home.’

c. *zinab silälellä*

zinab *silä-le/ä-all-ä*
rain because-NEG-exist-3MS
‘Since there is no rain...’

d. *i-bet indälelläčč*

i-bet *indä-le/ä-all-äčč*
in-house as-NEG-exist-3FS
‘As she is not at home...’

In the discussion to come, I mainly focus on the syntactic and semantic features and their relatedness to each other.

3. Syntactic and semantic features

3.1 Existential constructions

Existential constructions are used to denote structures that express a proposition about the existence of someone or something. As the examples listed below show, the existence

^① In the negative form, the /a/ of the verb stem *all-* is deleted. Consequently the negative verb surfaces as *yälläm*.

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of a pivot nominal could be stated without entailing its physical location.

- (5) a. *zinab all-ä*
rain exist-3MS.s
‘There is rain.’
- b. *ingda all-ä*
guest exist-3MS.s
‘There is a guest.’
- c. *zare sibsäba all-ä*
today meeting exist-3MS.s
‘There is a meeting today.’
- d. *yä-näggär-ä-h säw all-ä*
Rel-tell.PAST-3MS.s-2MS.o person exist-3MS.s
‘There is a person who told you.’

In these examples, there is no locative PP that refers to the place where the pivot NP exists or the existence takes place. In structures like (5d), for instance, the locative PP is not required at all.

When there is a locative PP in the existential sentences, it usually appears preceding the subject NP in the discourse. Syntactically speaking, it surfaces on topic position. Consider the following examples.

- (6) a. *i-zih bet säw all-ä*
in-this house person exist-3MS.s
‘There is a person in this house.’
- b. *bä-hagär-it-u idgät all-ä*
in-country-F-DEF development exist-3MS.s
‘There is a development in the country.’
- c. *č’aka wist’ anbässa-očč all-u*
forest inside lion-PL exist-3PL.s
‘There are lions in the forest.’

In these existential constructions, the locative PPs *i-zih bet* ‘in this house’, *bä-hagär-it-u* ‘in the country’, and *č’aka wist’* ‘in the forest’ occur preceding the subject NPs *säw* ‘person’, *idgät* ‘development’ and *anbässa-očč* ‘lions’ respectively.

In some constructions, however, the locative PP could take its canonical position preceding the verb. Hence the example in (6c), for instance, could appear like the following.

- (7) *anbässa-očč č’aka wist’ all-u*
lion-PL forest inside exist-3PL.s
‘There are lions in the forest.’

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In contrast, in some structures, it is not common to use the locative PP following the subject NP for existential interpretation. Hence, unlike the one in (6a), the structure in (8) is marginally accepted (although it is grammatically well formed).

- (8) [?]säw i-zih bet all-ä
 person in-this house exist-3MS.s

The above descriptions show that the presence of the locative PP is optional, though it appears underlyingly as a modifier to the existential verb. Generally speaking, in the discourse, the existential constructions with the word order PP+NP_{SUBJ}+V is more frequent and accepted than that of NP_{SUBJ}+PP+V.

The existential sentences are characterized by having a pivot nominal which denotes the entity or the individual about whom the existential proposition expresses existence as in *zinab* (5a), *ingda* (5b), *sibsäba* (5c), etc. From a purely formal viewpoint, the only obligatory component of the existential construction is the pivot nominal, and the existential verb. The pivot nominal is exposed to semantic restriction which will be discussed below.

In line with what Freeze (1992) explains, when we observe the semantic and pragmatic properties of Amharic existential constructions, the pivot NPs have Definiteness Effect (DE). That is to say, the NP cannot be definite because it introduces a novel referent into the discourse. Therefore, the pivot nominal must be indefinite as exemplified in the following structures.

- (9) a. zändro dirk' all-ä
 this year draught exist-3MS.s
 'There is a draught this year.'
 b. *zändro dirk'-u all-ä
 this year draught-DEF.M exist-3MS.s
 'There is the draught this year.'

In existential constructions, there are three semantic elements, Ps (process), E (existent), and L (locative). Hence, the semantic components of existential constructions *mäs'haf t'äräp'eza lay allä / t'äräp'eza lay mäs'haf allä* 'There is a book on the table' can be shown as follows.

E	L		Ps
<i>mäs'haf</i>	<i>t'äräp'eza</i>	<i>lay</i>	<i>allä</i>
book	table	on	there is
'There is a book on the table.'			
L		E	Ps
<i>t'äräp'eza</i>	<i>lay</i>	<i>mäs'haf</i>	<i>allä</i>
table	on	book	there is

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‘There is a book on the table.’

Note that the definiteness constraint can be waived when the structure conveys locative interpretation or a meaning of availability rather than existence. Compare the following examples.

(10) a. *mäs’haf* *t’äräp’eza* *lay* *all-ä*
book table on exist-3MS.s

‘There is a book on the table.’

b. *mäs’haf-u* *t’äräp’eza* *lay* *all-ä*
book-DEF.M table on exist-3MS.s

‘The book is on the table.’

The examples in (10) indicate that the definiteness constraint applies to existential interpretation but not to locative. That is why the pivot nominal, *mäs’haf* ‘book’, bears the definite article suffix *-u* in (10b) but not in (10a).

What is worth mentioning at this juncture is that although there are structures like in (9), the definiteness constraint in Amharic is not as strong as in other languages such as English. As illustrated in (10), in some constructions, the definiteness of the pivot nominal does not make the structure ungrammatical rather it changes the reading from existential to locative. Contrary to this, in English, for instance, the structure in (11a) is grammatical but not in (11b).

(11) a. *There is a book on the table.*

b. **There is the book on the table.*

The examples in (11) attest the impossibility of having a definite pivot nominal co-occurring with existentials. This in turn entails that English is sensitive to the definiteness constraint.

3.2 Locative constructions

Although the locative construction is similar to the existential construction in the existential verb form and syntactic constituents, there are indispensable morphosyntactic differences. Consequently both linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts determine the existential and the locative interpretations.

For instance, if we see the sentence *zinab allä*, it could have the existential reading ‘there is rain’ or if a speaker utters this sentence looking outside through the window, it could mean ‘It is raining outside’.

There are some linguistic features that distinguish locative constructions. The first is the position of the locative PP. As can be observed from the following examples, the locative PP commonly appears in situ as shown in (12) below.

(12) a. *aster* *i-bet* *all-äčč*
Aster in-house exist-3FS.s

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- ‘Aster is at home.’
 b. *mäs’haf-u t’äräp’eza lay all-ä*
 book-DEF.M table on exist-3MS.s
 ‘The book is on the table.’
 c. *zare i-bet all-ähu*
 today in-house exist-1S.s
 ‘I am at home today.’

Secondly, the copula *nä-* is used in locative constructions, which is not the case in existential constructions. Hence, the examples in (12), which are with the existential predicate *all-*, can be expressed in (13) with the copula *nä-* without affecting the meaning.

- (13) a. *aster i-bet nä-äčč*
 Aster in-house be-3FS.s
 ‘Aster is at home.’
 b. *mäs’haf-u t’äräp’eza lay nä-w*
 book-DEF.M table on be-3MS.o
 ‘The book is on the table.’
 c. *zare i-bet nä-ññ*
 today in-house be-1S.o
 ‘I am at home today.’

The locative constructions have three semantic elements, namely Ps (process), E (existent), and L (locative) which constitute the clause. Therefore, the word order of the locative construction is E+L+Ps. It is imperative to recount that the subject of the locative predicate is a pivot NP of an existential predicate. Accordingly, the subject of the locative predicate, *anbässa-w* ‘the lion’ in (14), is a pivot of the existential predicate, as *anbässa* ‘a lion’ in (15).

- (14) *anbässa-w č’aka wist’ all-ä*
 lion-DEF.M forest inside exist-3MS.s
 ‘The lion is in the forest.’
 (15) *č’aka wist’ anbässa all-ä*
 forest inside lion exist-3MS.s
 ‘There is a lion in the forest.’

Besides the difference observed in the word order, the examples also lead to another distinguishing feature of the locative construction, the definiteness constraint. The subject NP of the locative sentence bears the definite article, whereas the pivot of the existential nominal is indefinite. Hence the definiteness constraint does not apply for locative constructions.

In an attempt to recapitulate the above discussion, the semantic components of the

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locative construction, *mäs'hafu t'äräp'eza lay allä/näw* 'The book is on the table.' is shown below.

E	L	Ps	
<i>mäs'hafu</i>	<i>t'äräp'eza</i>	<i>lay</i>	<i>allä/näw</i>
the book	table	on	there is /is

'The book is on the table.'

3.3 Possessive constructions

The phrase 'possessive construction' is used to refer to a non-canonical construction which expresses a proposition about the relation between a possessor and a possessed NP. In Amharic, possession is expressed in attributive and predicative constructions. The former type is expressed by genitive NPs (16a) and the latter in turn has the predicator *näw* 'is' (16b) and the existential verb *all-* (16c) as exemplified below.

- (16) a. *yä-kasa mäs'haf*
 GEN-Kasa book
 'Kasa's book'
- b. *mäs'haf-u yä-kasa nä-w*
 book-DEF GEN-Kasa be-3MS.s
 'The book is Kasa's.'
- c. *kasa mäs'haf all-ä-w*
 Kasa book exist-3MS.s-3MS.o
 'Kasa has a book.'

As can be seen from (16b) and (16c), the copula and the existential verbs are used to express possession. We can call these possessive constructions *copulative* and *existential* possessive constructions respectively. The two predicative possessives (16b) and (16c) express the possessive relation between the possessor and the possessed NPs. They can both be analyzed into three semantic elements, the Possessor (Pr), the Possessed (Pd), and the Process (Ps) as shown below.

Pd	Pr	Ps	
<i>mäs'haf-u</i>	<i>yä-kasa</i>	<i>näw</i>	(16b)
book-DEF.M	GEN-Kasa	is	
Pr	Pd	Ps	
<i>Kasa</i>	<i>mäs'haf</i>	<i>alläw</i>	(16c)
Kasa	book	has	

Hence, as can be observed from the above patterns, the two predicative constructions have differences in the verb choice used and word order. Besides the two constructions have a difference in definiteness. In the copulative possessive construction, the possessed nominal (Pd) is definite, whereas in the existential possessive construction is not. The main

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focus of the discussion in this study is, however, restricted to the existential predicative possessive construction.

When the existential verb *all-* is used as a possessive predicator, it bears an object pronoun suffix following a subject pronoun suffix. The subject and the object pronoun suffixes agree in number, person and gender with the possessed and the possessor NPs respectively as shown below.

- (17) *is^wa_i mäs 'haf_j all-ä_j-at_i*
 she book exist-3MS.s-3MS.o
 'She has a book.'

The above sentence shows the surface structure which does not show the basic SOV word order of the language (See Baye, 1997 for the details). The possessor NP is constructed in prepositional phrase that the language employs to encode indirect object relation. Hence, *is^wa* 'she' has the underlying form *lä-is^wa* 'for/to her'. This indirect object constituent implies that there is a direct object, which does not have an agreement suffix on the verb. The grammatical subject, *mäs 'haf* 'book' is a logical direct object. Unlike the structures in locative and existential structures, in possessive construction, the possessive predicate obligatorily bears an object pronoun suffix that agrees with the possessor. Furthermore, the locative PP, which has the possessor NP as a complement, does not normally surface with the head P. Put it another way, the P-head is phonologically null.

Although the surface structure of the possessive constructions is [NP NP V], its deep structure is [e PP NP V]. Hence, when we critically examine the morphosyntax of the existential verb used in possessive construction, we learn that the underlying structure reveals a feature of ditransitive verbs, such as *näggär-* 'tell', *sät 't*- 'give', of the language.

In the discourse, there seem to be comparatively strict word-order restrictions on the possessive construction. A possessed NP is preceded by a possessor (Pd). The surface structure of the construction does not follow the canonical SOV word order of the language. It should also be noted that the possessor is out of the scope of the sentence.

Unlike the locative constructions described above, the possessives are sensitive to the definiteness effect. Consider the following examples.

- (18) a. *lij-u wändim-očč all-u-t*
 child-DEF.M brother-PL exist-3PL-3MS.o
 'The boy has brothers.'
- b. **lij-u wändim-očč-u all-u-t*
 child-DEF.M brother-PL-DEF exist-3PL-3MS.o
- c. *kasa lij all-ä-w*
 Kasa child exist-3MS.s-3MS.o
 'Kasa has a child.'

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d. *kasa	lij-u	all-ä-w
Kasa	child-DEF.M	exist-3MS.s-3MS.o

3.4 Syntactic and semantic relatedness

In this subsection, we investigate the syntactic and semantic features through which the three constructions are related to one another. The features are: the verb form, the prototypical shared meaning, word order and the definiteness effect.

From the outset, contrary to Lyons (1967), who claims that existentials and possessives originate from locatives, this study argues that the existential is the major sources from which locative and possessives are derived. Basically, both constructions are existentials whose locative elements are prototypically spatial and human respectively. Their formal likeness is evident in their choice of verbs realizing the process.

Although there is the parallelism among the Amharic existential, locative and possessive constructions, there are morphological, syntactic and semantic differences observed. With regard to the morphology of the verb, in existential and locative constructions, the existential verb stem is used attaching a subject pronoun affix. Hence, in these constructions, the morphological make-up of the verb is the same. Unlike in these constructions, in possessive constructions, the verb bears an object pronoun suffix following the subject pronoun suffix. That is, the predicative verb carries an object suffix pronoun, which is not the case in existential and locative constructions. And so, the verb is composed of three morphemes in possessive constructions.

In reference to syntax, existential and locative constructions are formed with an existential verb and a noun phrase (a pivot), which serves as a subject that agrees with the verb. On the other hand, the possessives do not follow the basic SOV structure of the language. In possessive construction, the prototypical subject position is empty in the underlying structure. For that reason, the surface structure [NP [NP V]] is derived from the deep structure [e PP NP V]. Furthermore, the PP is optional in existential constructions, which is not the case in the locatives and possessives. In possessive constructions, the head of the PP could not be phonetically realized.

It is, however, undeniable that to tell the syntactic difference between the existential and the locative constructions is not an easy task. A given construction is either an existential or a locative depending on whether the intent of the construction is to introduce the existence of something as new information or to give new information about the whereabouts of something which is no longer new information.

Semantically, the existentials and possessives are constrained by the definiteness effect. That is, the subject NPs of the locatives bear the definite article, whereas the pivots of the existential and possessive nominals are indefinite.

Nonetheless it should be noted that the three constructions are relational processes that

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they can be integrated into systemic syntactic and semantic features. The constructions show systematic affinity to one another in both syntax and semantics. If we see the possessive constructions, which look unlike the other two constructions in morphology and syntax, the possessed NP plays the role of existence or location; that is, [A B *alläw*] is conceptually correspond to 'B exists/is at A'. Similarly the underlying structure of the possessor NP is parallel to the oblique PP.

4. Conclusion

Amharic existential, locative and possessive constructions use the same verb stem *all-* 'exist'. The verb is defective in its derivation. Based on facts from sister languages, it has been argued that the verb had three radicals. However, diachronically it has lost its initial and ultimate radicals. The loss of the final radical hasn't left any phonological effect on the preceding vowel. Besides, it is unproductive in its conjugations. Consequently it lacks imperfective, jussive and gerundive stem derivations. Amharic perfective verb stems convey simple past tense. Contrary to this behavior of the verbs of the language, the perfective stem *all-* expresses present tense. It uses a different verb, *näbbär-* 'there was', for past tense. Likewise as it does not derive its imperfective, jussive and gerundive stems from the underlying basic root; rather it employs another verb stem, *nor-*, which has the underlying consonantal root *n-w-r* 'exist, live'. With regard to the negative form, it has different negative prefixes for main clause and subordinate clause. It uses the negative prefix *yä-* for the main clause and the prefix *-le-/lä-* for the subordinate clause. The verb occurs at final position in all the three constructions. In existential and locative constructions, the verb only bears subject pronoun affixes. In possessive constructions, in contrast, it suffixes object pronouns.

In existential constructions, a locative PP is optional. If it appears, frequently it surfaces on topic position. Unlike the other constructions, existentials use the existential verb *all-* only. In these constructions, the pivot appears without any definite article. Put it another way, definiteness constraint applies to the existential constructions.

The locative constructions are characterized by having a definite subject NP. In the locative constructions, the existential verb *all-* and the locative copula *nä-* are used to convey the meaning of availability or presence.

In possessive construction, unlike the structures in locative and existential structures, the verb obligatorily bears an object pronoun suffix that agrees with the possessor. The possessor NP is a complement in PP, which does not have a phonetically realized head P. It also obligatorily surfaces on topic positions, out of the scope of the sentence.

The data we have seen in the discussions show that the constructions exhibit similarities and differences in the morphological structure of the verb used and in word order. They are

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systematically related to one another in form and in meaning. Formally they are similar in that they are composed of the same syntactic constituents. Their main difference lies in definiteness of the pivot nominals and word order.

Analogous to the cover term locationals used in the literature for the three constructions, I prefer to use existential for the constructions in Amharic. I did so because I have found that they are systematically related to each other in using the same verb stem and in their existential nature.

The definiteness effect is held responsible for the differences between existentials and possessives on one hand and locative constructions on the other. That is, semantically, both existentials and possessives are sensitive to the definiteness effect, but the locatives are not.

The three constructions conceptually express the same state of affairs, that is, something exists in a certain location, spatial or human. One is chosen over the other in accordance with the definiteness of the E and the morphological structure of the verb. If the E, for instance, is definite, it is locative.

Abbreviations

1	First Person	NP	Noun Phrase
2	Second Person	o	Object
3	Third Person	PAST	Past Tense
AUX	Auxiliary	Pd	Possessed
DE	Definiteness Effect	PL	Plural
DEF	Definite	PP	Prepositional Phrase
E	Existent	Ps	Process
e	Empty	Pr	Possessor
F	Feminine	PRES	Present Tense
FS	Feminine Singular	Rel	Relativizer
GEN	Genitive	S	Singular
L	Locative	s	Subject
M	Masculine	SG	Singular
MS	Masculine Singular	SOV	Subject Object Verb
NEG	Negative	SUBJ	Subject

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