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**Gender, Number and Agreement in Afar (Cushitic language)**  
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## INTRODUCTION

Afar is a Lowland East Cushitic language spoken by more than 1.700.000 people, in Djibouti (*ca* 310.000), Eritrea (*ca* 305.000 ) and Ethiopia (*ca* 1.100.000)

We have collected our data on the field<sup>1</sup>, with different speakers in Djibouti, in Eritrea and in Ethiopia. Only a few examples were elicited.

## SOME PRELIMINARY LINGUISTIC REMARKS

Afar is typically a SOV language, with postpositions.

The canonic order in the noun phrase is determiner/qualifier + determined/qualified

In the verb phrase V + auxiliary; and in the sentence: dependent clause before Matrix clause

It is a partially inflected language (only some masculine marked nouns with non-stressed vowel final are concerned). Three cases are marked by apophony of the vowel final (-î) and switching of the stress on the final : : Absolutive *vs* Nominative / Genitive.

There are two genders M., F. and two numbers SG., PL.

The gender is marked on the SG. and PL. nouns. The PL. is marked on the nouns and pronouns. There is a gender opposition for the 3rd SG of the personal pronouns

There are three types of verb conjugations: the number is always marked, the gender is marked only in two types of verbs and exclusively for the 3rd SG.

## INTRODUCTION

In many languages of the world, agreement is a matter of syntax and of covariance. Reusing Steele's definition of agreement (1978: 610), quoted by Corbett (2006:4) "[...] there is systematic covariance between a semantic or formal property of one element and a formal property of another". In Afar sentence, there is covariance between the subject (personal

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pronoun / noun (phrase)), and the verb<sup>2</sup>. Following Givon (1970), Hayward (1988), and Corbett (2006: 4) we can consider that the subject pronoun/noun (phrase) is the *controller*<sup>3</sup>, and the verb the *target*<sup>4</sup>.

Only the plural personal pronouns and a few nouns referring to sex-differentiated animates require the plural agreement. For the other nouns, covariance usually concerns the gender, characterized by inverse gender between SG and PL, as in many Cushitic and Omotic languages.

Referring to Corbett (2006: 4), it can be said that the ‘agreement features’ are gender, and eventually number. The predominant situation is that of syntactic agreement, but we shall see that the role of semantics is not insignificant even though it is underlying .

## GENDER AND NUMBER MARKS

### VERB

In Afar there are three types of conjugations. Whatever the type all the verbs have the number indices suffixed to their stem. There are 3 persons (3 for SG and 3 for PL) with gender opposition (M. vs F). marked for the 3<sup>rd</sup> SG only. Types 1 and 2 differ by the position of their personal indices: prefixed for type 1 and suffixed for type 2.

- **CI: PI+ ASPECTUAL MARK + STEM + (NI)**
- |     |  |  |   |
|-----|--|--|---|
| (1) | <b>j-a-marté</b><br>3M-IPFV-come(SG)<br>He comes | <b>t-a-marté</b><br>3F/2-IPFV-come(SG)<br>She comes/You come | <b>j-a-marté-(e)n(i)</b><br>3-IPFV-come-PL(LF)<br>They come (F/M) |
|-----|--|--|---|
- 
- **CII: STEM + ASPECTUAL MARK + PI +(NI)**
- |     |  |   |   |
|-----|--|---|---|
| (2) | <b>ged--é</b><br>go- 1/3M.PFV(SG)<br>I/He went | <b>ged--t-é [gedǰé]</b><br>go-3F/2-IPFV(SG)<br>She/You went | <b>ged-é-(e)n(i)</b><br>go-3PFV-PL(LF)<br>They went (F/M) |
|-----|--|---|---|

- Conjugation of type III is apart. Morphologically: specific markers suffixed to the stem, no gender opposition, no aspectual opposition.

The marks are arranged as follows:

- **CIII: STEM+PI +(NI)**
- |     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| (3) | <b>dat-á</b><br>be_black-3(SG)<br>He/She is/was black | <b>dat-o(:)n(u)</b><br>be_black-3PL (LF)<br>They are/were black (F/M) |
|-----|---|---|

In the three conjugations the number is marked in PL by the same suffix morpheme **-n-**

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<sup>2</sup> In the noun phrase, there is covariance in gender between the demonstrative determiner and the determined noun. There is no adjective category in this language. The quality is expressed by means of a restrictive relative clause (Simeone-Senelle 2007)

<sup>3</sup> “The element which determines the agreement”

<sup>4</sup> “The element whose form is determined by agreement”



- (8) **númu=h**      **maláb**    **jaḥé:**  
 man(EF)-POST    honey    3M.IPFV.give  
 He gives honey to a man

## 2. NUMBER

Referring to Parker and Hayward (1985: 227) “There are three categories of number in Afar: singular, plural and singulative”. It however seems more adequate to consider that there are two numbers organized into two systems. The main system is SG *versus* PL. Whereby the PL form is derived from SG by the modification of the SG stem: 1) by internal derivation corresponding to the so-called broken plural in Semitic languages, 2) by suffixation of a morpheme (the so-called external plural).

The secondary system is Collective *vs* Singulative, where SING is derived from COLL by suffix. The general Plural *vs* SG-PL may be joined to this sub-system,. This system is rare. Cf. Corbett (2000: 126).

While plural and singulative are marked, singular and collective are not marked as such in the nouns. SG and COLL are lexical. PL. is derived from singular and SING. from COLL.

## 3. NUMBER AND GENDER

All forms whatever their number are marked in gender. One of the most remarkable features in some Cushitic languages like ‘Afar and Somali (Dubnov, 2003: 27-9) is that the majority of the animate or inanimate nouns, masculine in the singular are feminine in the plural and vice versa. As for the singulative, it may have a different gender from that of the collective if the SING. noun is correlated to sexual animate it can be marked as M. or F.

The inverse gender between singular and plural is a phenomenon common to many Cushitic and Omotic languages. It is generally named ‘gender polarity’.

Some examples of inverse gender for animates and inanimates: SG *vs* marked PL

- (9) **dabé:la** (M.SG) ‘billy goat’ *vs* PL. **dabelwá** (F.)  
**garbó** (F.SG) ‘thicket, wooded area’ *vs* PL. **gárab(a)** or **gárob(u)** (M)

However, few nouns do not obey the canonic rule of the inverse gender. They are mainly inanimates, marked as feminine or masculine. Among them many are borrowed from Arabic.

Same gender for SG. and PL

- (10) **ʕalé** (F.) ‘hill, mountain’, has three plurals, all marked as feminine **ʕalwá** / **ʕalelwá** / **ʕale:lá**  
**boohá** (F.) ‘hole, puncture’, with a PL. **booha:ḥí** (PH) marked as F.  
**wahró** (F) ‘she-panther’, PL **wahrorrá** panthers. SG and PL are F.  
 The same with

**boro:sí/baro:sí** (F.) ‘anchor’, PL. **baro:sijá / baro:siját(a)** ...**boroyiyatá** (PH) (Arabic borrowing)

**warkát(a)** (M.) ‘paper, letter (post)’, PL. **wará:kit(i)** (PH) (Arabic borrowing)

#### COLL vs SING

Like plural collective is marked in gender, but unlike plural it is unmarked in number.

Semantically, plural refers to ‘a multiplicity of referents’ (Parker & Hayward 1985: 227) and collective refers to a group of animates (humans, animals) or inanimates (for species of plants). A unity, a singulative, can be extracted from the set by a specific derivation. The singulative is marked in gender and in number.

(11) **agábu** ‘women’ COLL marked as M., SING **ag(a)boytá** (F) .

**kimbír** ‘birds’. COLL. marked as M., SING **kimbiró** (F.)

**ešébi** Acacia (M.), SING **ešebtó** (F.)

As for SG and PL, see (10), few nouns have the same gender mark in COLL and SING.

(12) **fungá** (F.) Doum palm (Hyphaene Thebaica) , SING. **fungaytó** (F.)

**kullúm** (M.) ‘fish’, SING **kullúnta** (M.)

#### COLL without SING

Lastly, another category of nouns (animates: human and animals), have a semantic value of COLL, but there is no derived singulative form. They may function as suppletive plural for some nouns which have no derived plural.

(13) Examples for animals:

**wadár(a)** ‘goats’. COLL. (M.), including females and males, is used as the suppletive PL of **reytá** (F. SG) ‘goat’. There is no derived PL. from (F.) SG **reytá**. On the other hand, for the male ‘billy goat’, there is PL. **dabelwá** (F.) derived from SG **dabé:la** (M.) ‘billy goat’, with reverse gender.

**gá:la** (M.) ‘camels (mostly female)’, there is no singulative, but the COLL. does not function as suppletive plural. The feminine and masculine singulars have both their own derived plural (with reverse gender for the males): **alá** ‘she-camel’(F.), PL. **alo:lí** (F.), and **rakúb** (M.) ‘bull camel’ with PL **ra:ki:bá** (F).

(14) For humans:

**úrru** (M) ‘children’ is a COLL. including **áwka** (M) ‘boy’ and **awká** (F) ‘girl’, without SING form .

Likewise **ɖajló** (F. COLL) ‘children, offspring’ has no derived SING.

In some dialects spoken in Djibouti,

**agábu** ‘women’ is a COLL. without SING. In this dialect, the COLL. is semantically a suppletive plural for **barrá** (F. SG) ‘woman’. Elsewhere **ag(a)boytá** is SING. of **agábu** (**barrá** is not used).

(15) The noun referring to people, tribes, usually marked as M. have no SING.

**sinám** ‘people’, **mára** ‘people’, **ɣafár** ‘Afar people’,

In this category of nouns, some are marked as F. and have SING. with differentiated gender. Among them are loanwords borrowed from Arabic.

(16) **ħabjá** ‘Ethiopian people’ > **ħabjí:ta** (M.) and **ħabjí:tá** (F.) ‘Ethiopian man’ and ‘Ethiopian woman’

**so:ma:lí** ‘Somalian people’ > **so:ma:lí:ta** (M.SG), **so:ma:lítá** (F.SG)

**faransa:rwí** ‘French people’ > **faransa:rwíta** (M.SG), **faransa:rwítá** (F.SG)

#### AGREEMENT CONTROLLER-TARGET

The agreement of the verb with its subject depends on the noun category in which the subject belongs. It can be complete or partial.

##### 1. Complete agreement (gender and number).

When the subject is an independent personal pronoun referring to sexual animate, the agreement of the verb with its controller is complete: it agrees in person, in gender (in the 3<sup>rd</sup> SG), and in number (SG vs PL).

When the subject is an explicit personal pronoun, the verb agrees in person, gender, and number with its subject.

(17) **is**                    **t-a-ma:té**                    -                    **ísin**                    **ab-t-á-n**  
 PR.S.3F.SG    3F.IPFV-come                    -                    PR.S.2PL    speak-2-IPFV-PL  
 She comes                    -                    You speak

(18) **úsun**                    **dat-on<sup>6</sup>**                    -                    **nanú**                    **ɣund-ino**  
 PR.S.3PL    be\_black-3PL                    -                    PR.S.1PL    be\_young-1PL  
 They are/were black                    -                    We are/were young

In other cases, the agreement is partial, it concerns, with a very few exceptions, the feature of gender only.

##### 2. Partial agreement

✓ 2.1. When the subject is a noun referring to animates or inanimates and marked as plural, it requires the 3<sup>rd</sup> singular verb form.

The agreement is partial when the verb agrees with the marked gender but not with the marked number of the noun. The verb is in SG.

(19)	Singular		vs	Plural	
	<b>dabe:lí</b>	<b>gedé</b>	-	<b>dabelwá</b>	<b>ged-t-é [geddé]</b>
	billy_goat.M.S	go.3MSG.PFV	-	billy_goats.F	go.3F-PFV.SG
	A/the billy goat left		-	(The) billy goats left	

<sup>6</sup> There is neither gender nor aspectual opposition in the conjugation of this type of verb

(20)	Singular	vs	Plural
	<b>ʕalé</b> <b>taníh</b>	-	<b>ʕale:lá / ʕalwá</b> <b>taníh</b>
	mountain 3F.IPFV.be	-	mountains 3F.IPFV.be
	There is a mountain	-	There are mountains
(21)	Singular	vs	Plural
	<b>waħró</b> <b>ged-t-é [gedǰé]</b>	-	<b>waħrorá</b> <b>ged-t-é [gedǰé]</b>
	she-panther go.3F-PFV.SG	-	she-panthers go.3F-PFV.SG
	The she-panther left	-	The female panthers left

For the male, there is another word **kábʕi**, with inverse gender in the PL.: **kaba:ʕá**.

Few nouns can have more than one Plural with different genders. The target has the same gender as the controller.

(22)	Singular	vs	Plural
	<b>boro:sí/baro:sí</b> <b>rad-d-é</b>	-	<b>boro:sijá / baro:siját</b> <b>raddé / radé</b>
	anchor fall-3F-PFV	-	anchors (F.)/(M). fall-3F-PFV / fall-3M-PFV
	the anchor fell	-	The anchors fell

The only exception in our data concerns a category of boats, borrowed from Arabic. The agreement in gender does not correspond to the morpho-phonological mark. The noun is marked as masculine but the verb is in the 3F.SG.

Here F. is a default gender in the agreement with inanimate controller marked as M.

(23)	<b>domík</b>	<b>ħayyú</b>	<b>má</b>	<b>ged-d-á</b>
	dhow	Obock	NEG	go-3F-IPFV.SG

The dhow doesn't go to Obock (MHK)

In the plural there is not reverse gender, the agreement is F.: **dowá:ník gedǰa**.

In the same semantic field, two other nouns borrowed from Arabic, do not follow the same agreement rules.

(24)	<b>ħurí / ħawarí</b>	'small boat, dinghi', noun is F. in SG. and PL. The agreement is in F.
	<b>markáb / mara:kíḅ</b>	'ferry (Dj.)' M. in SG and PL. with the agreement in M.

2.2 When the subject is a collective, it is always marked as M. The rules of agreement depend on the semantic value of the COLL, and on the degree of semantic definiteness.

### 2.2.1 For a very restricted list

There is alternative in the agreement : the verb agrees with the marked gender of the collective or with the semantic meaning of the COLL.

(25)	<b>urrí</b>	<b>abalá</b>
	children.S (boys and girls)	play.IPFV.3SG

The children play

(26)	<b>marí</b>	<b>rabé</b>
	people.S	die.PFV.3M.SG

People died



Both nouns together with **agábu** are exceptions in this system. They may have an agreement in plural but allow for alternatives between syntactic and semantic agreement. There are some examples where the speaker uses syllepsis and the verb is in the plural. It can be said :

- (27) **urrí / marí**                      **abalán**                      / **rabén**  
 children.S / people.S.      play.IPFV.3PL      /die.PFV.3PL

Children/People play / died

- (28) **agabí**                      **jemerté**                      / **jemertén**  
 women.S      come.IPFV.3M      /come.PFV.3PL

Women come

Only these three nouns are concerned by this phenomenon (cf. Hayward and Mous 2012).

### 2.2.2 COLL. without SING.

COLL. refers to a more undifferentiated set from which no unity or group can be extracted. The verb agrees in F. Concerned are the nouns referring to people, tribes, nationalities, and cattle. We are not aware of any exception from this rule.

- (29) **wadár**                      **t-a-loilé**  
 sheep, goats      3F-IPFV-graze.SG

Sheep/goats graze

- (30) **ʃafár**                      **t-e-merté**  
 Afar people      3F-PFV-come.SG

Afar people came

- (31) **sinám**      **rabté**  
 people      die.3F.PFV.SG

People died

- (32) **sinám**      **rabté**                      **ímmay**      **dajlisén**                      **marí**                      **má-rabinna**  
 people      die.3F.PFV.SG      but      cure.PFV.3PL      people.S      NEG-die.PFV.NEG.3SG

People died but the people who have been cured did not die.

When the collective refers to an indefinite set, the word has a low degree of definiteness. This semantic property explains the syntax of these words thus they cannot be marked as definite by a demonstrative or a restrictive relative clause. Extraction of some elements from the mass is impossible, consequently on the morphological level, these collectives have no derived singulatives.

The collective **mára** can be determined by a demonstrative **á mara** ‘this people’ **á marí rabé /rabén** (cf. ex. 26 & 27) ‘these people died’, or by a restrictive relative clause (cf. ex. 32).

The word can be considered semantically as an equivalent of a suppletive plural for **num** ‘man/ human being’.

With **sinam/sinamma** none of these constructions is possible

Both nouns have different syntactic functioning linked to their different semantic values. They are not semantically equivalent, contrary to some assertions (example Morin 2012 ‘*sinam= mara*’),

The feminine agreement for the marked masculine collective nouns, referring to a mass in which particular elements are not distinguishable, cannot be considered as an agreement in gender, but as an agreement by default. Moreover in Cushitic languages ‘Feminine is associated with multiple reference’ (Mous 2012).

F. is at the same time a default gender for few inanimate nouns (cf. ex. 23 **domík**) and a default number for the COLL referring to animates.

## 2. CONJOINED NOUNS

When there are two or more subjects joined by a connective (postclitic =j or the morpheme **kee** ‘and’), the agreement depends on the grammatical category of subjects:

- 1) the subjects of the predicate are personal pronouns in the absolutive case.

The verb is in the plural, and agreement in person depends on the person hierarchy (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>)

(33) **ko:**            **kee**        **yo:**        **n-e-me:té**  
 PR.2SG            and        PR.1SG     1PL.-PFV-come

You and me came

(34) **ke:n**        **ke:**    **si:n**        **tagorri-h**        **t-a-marén**  
 PR.3PL            and    PR.2PL     Tadjoura-to     2-IPV-go.PL

They and you go to Tadjoura

- 2) The subjects are pronoun and noun :

(35) **nee**        **kee**        **ni**        **ba:burrá**        **gíta**        **alfennó<sup>7</sup>**  
 PR.1PL        COORD    POSS.1PL    cars            road            close.FUT.1PL  
 We and our cars we ‘ll close the road

- 3) The subjects are nouns SG, PL, COLL. or SING. marked in gender.

With proper nouns

The verb is at the 3<sup>rd</sup> F.SG

(36) **málko** **ke:** **‘ábdo** **gilla:bí-uwwa**        **bej-t-a-ih**  
 Malko    and    ‘Abdo.    fishing.GEN-goods        take-3F-IPFV-CON

Malko and ‘Abdo take the fishing equipment and

**gillá:bi-h**                            **geq-q-a**  
 fishing-to                            go-3F-IPFV.SG

they go to fish (MHK 2004: 137)

With nouns referring to animates

(37) **labhá-j**    **agábu-j**        **úrru**        **ke:**    **ido:lá**  
 men-CON    women-CON    children    and    old\_people

The men, the women, the children and the old people

---

<sup>7</sup> The speaker is a bus driver on strike.

**ħaǰá gúba-l tan**  
 tree underneath-in 3F.IPFV.be  
 are under the tree. (MHK 2004: 47)

Cf. (38)

(38) **niko:la ke: kaj wi:da[...] hajsit-én**  
 Nicolas and POS.3.M.SG guide [...] lace-PFV-3PL  
 Nicolas and his guide placed for themselves (MHK 2004: 128)

It is to be noticed that the grammatical subjects, noun or pronoun, are not in nominative case (**agábu** not **agbí**, **úrru** and not **urrí**)

In these examples, feminine agreement is to be considered as a default agreement (cf. also Corbett 2000: 205). cf. above ex. \*\*\*, and it seems to be norm

Nevertheless, as for few exceptions with collectives, when controllers refer to animates, there may be syllepsis, and a semantic agreement with the verb in PL. We have some examples only when the subjects refer to humans or animals. For Corbett (2000: 205) 'With noun phrases headed by non-human animates there is a degree of uncertainty about the acceptability of plural agreement' He gives the following example with a question mark before the verb in PL.

**wákrii-kee yangúla kudde/ ? kuden**  
 jackal.SG.MASC-and / hyena.DG.MASC / ran.away.SG.FEM / ran.away.PL  
 The jackal and the hyena ran away (Corbett 2000: 205 (50))

For our informants in the north-west of the Afar area in Ethiopia both occurrences are valid: kudde (3F.SG) or kuden (3PL)

Hayward and Corbett (1988) give some examples with semantic agreement in other contexts: with inanimates and animates, with animates in the nominative case ... No example of this type is attested in our data. The mismatch of the agreement rules may be due to the fact that (Hayward & Corbett 1988: 276) had one single Afar speaker as informant and some occurrences have been obviously elicited.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the Gender-polarity in Afar, the agreement rules for the plural marked nouns can be summarized as follows:

SG.M + V.3M.SG	vs	PL.F. + V.3F.SG
SG.F + V.3F.SG	vs	PL.M + V.3M.SG

The exceptions concern the nouns which have the same marked gender in SG and in PL, consequently not submitted to reverse gender.

Concerning the collectives marked as M., never not marked in number. The gender agreement depends on semantics of the COLL and its degree of definiteness: the agreement of the verb is not systematically linked to the marked gender of the noun.

A few loanwords marked as masculine have a feminine agreement.

- 1 COLL.M + V.3M.SG Or (for few words in limited list) COLL.M + V.3PL
- 2 COLL.M + V.3F.SG

COLL type 1 and 2 are not equivalent on the semantic level.

The Collective set can be subdivided into two: those which require a syntactic agreement, gender agreement (verb in M/F. SG), with three exceptions (ex. (27), (28)) where there is alternative between syntactic and semantic agreement, and the second sub-set requiring a default agreement, the verb is then in F.SG)

With conjoined subjects, usually the feminine singular default agreement is applied, but if the subjects refer to sex-differentiated animates there may be syllepsis and semantic agreement. The verb is then in PL.. If one of the subject is marked as nominative then the agreement is obligatory semantic. Resolution rules applied for conjoined subject nouns are analyzed in detail by Hayward and Corbett (1988). It issues from this study that the variability of agreement rules and the alternative between a semantic agreement and an agreement by default concerns more controllers than one could expect.

Considering that Feminine mark refers to a notion of plurality, the agreement in F.SG. with some COLL and with conjoined nouns can be considered as semantic agreement, and not as a syntactic one. Indeed three M. COLL and conjoined nouns referring to sexual animates have an alternative agreement with the target in PL, it is an overtly semantic agreement, overruling the syntactic agreement.

Agreement in F.SG. with some COLL and with conjoined nouns makes obvious that the semantics of the word can play a more important role than the marked gender. There is semantic agreement (notion of plurality to whom F. refers) and not syntactic agreement in this case. With three M. COLL and with conjoined nouns referring to sexual animates the agreement is overtly semantic because /since agreement in number is an alternative to the F.SG agreement.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

CI conjugation of type I – CII conjugation of type II – CIII conjugation of type III - COLL collective – CON connective - EF extended form - F. feminine – M. masculine – PI personal index – NI number index - PL. plural – PLUR plulative – S subject – SG singular – SING singulative

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