

Research Note

Number Marking and Agreement in Amharic

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Abstract

In this paper we treat how singular and plural nouns are marked in Amharic. In Amharic plurals are formed by using different strategies. The first one is by the suffix **-očč**. The other plural number marking is formed by internal changes to the stem which is referred to ‘broken plurals’ which might have Geez background. The other one is by reduplicating all or part of the stem of the noun. Moreover, there are also different ways of marking plural numbers in the language. For instance, there is plural agreements morpheme in verb forms. That means plural is also marked on verb stems¹. The other interesting argument in this paper is the language uses two plural forms simultaneously, which is the focus of this paper. The position of plural formation in compound nouns, the number agreements with different word categories of Amharic to express plurality of noun is well discussed. The researcher tries to show some related and different experiences from other Ethiopian Languages in order to support his argument.

1 Introduction

Ethiopia is the homeland of a remarkable variety of languages and cultures. Their cultural and linguistic diversity results from a complex historical background, compounded by geographical and social differences. One of the dominant languages spoken in the country is Amharic. Amharic is the working language of the Federal Government and some regions in the country and lingua franca to the most peoples of the state. It has about 27 consonants and 7 vowels. The word order of the language is SOV (Bender 1976: 79). It is spoken by about 17,000, 000 native peoples (2007 census report).

¹ It is subject-verb agreement.

Most of the Amhara people are farmers. They live in large numbers in the northern part of the country. Amharic has five well-known dialects; and these are the Gojam, the Wollo, the Gondar, the Shewa and Addis Ababa dialects. The names of the dialects are derived from the place names where they are predominately spoken.

2 Previous works

Amharic, compared with the other thoroughly unstudied languages of the country, has been well studied particularly with respect to its grammatical structure. These may include Baye (1999, 2000), Bender (1968, 1976), Girmay (1992), Leslau (1995), Alemayehu (1995), Getahun (1997). There are also some unpublished studies: Mullen (1986), Mulugeta (2001) Mphil thesis, Lulseged (1981) M.A thesis, Aster (1981) a B.A Thesis in Linguistics, etc. Especially Baye (1995) and Getahun (1997) discussed the grammatical features of the language in Amharic. In that connection they discussed a few issues concerning Amharic numeral; for instance Baye (2000: 111-112) discussed about singular and plural nouns in Amharic that the plural can be formed by the plural suffix **-očč**, the Geez based plural suffix **-at** and reduplication of the stem as shown in example, a, b, and c respectively:

a.	zaf	“tree”	zaf-očč	“trees”
b.	kahin	“priest”	kahin-at	“priests”
c.	k’il	“gourd”	k’ilak’il	“gourds”

However, he did not discuss how the Amharic plural suffix **-očč** and the Geez based plural suffixes do interact each other. Moreover, other varieties of Geez based plural markers are not addressed. In addition, he discusses only full reduplication system of plural formation but not the partial type and different forms which needs further analysis and discussion. Further, Baye (2000) never treats the detail of number agreements with different grammatical categories. Getahun (1997) in his grammar book also discusses the same thing with Baye (2000) except the prefix **?inna-**, which is followed by Amharic pronouns (see 4.2). In each case both authors did not make a detail analysis of number marking in Amharic since their main concern is on Amharic Grammatical structure. The sound alternation during the process of plural suffixation, various forms of Geez based plural formation, number marking varieties in mass nouns, number

marking in different word categories and double plural marking process in Amharic etc. need further research and analysis which are the concern of this paper.

Typologically most languages have two morpho-syntactic features that distinguish, singular and plural. Some languages have singular, dual and plural. In many languages singular is unmarked and plural is marked using a specific plural suffix. For instance, in Amharic plural nouns are normally marked by using the suffix **-očč**. There are also some languages that mark singleton. For instance, Majang has collective **ɲɛɛti** “lice”, singulative form **ɲɛɛti-n** “louse” (Bender 1983: 124). In Amharic there is no singular marking suffix to indicate singular nouns; however, there is a strategy to indicate singularity. The common way of singular representation is suffixless noun. The other one is gender marker makes the number singular because plural nouns are not inflected for gender. For instance, **fijjəl** “goat” : **fijjəl-u-a** “goat-DEF-F” **fijjəl-u** “goat-DEF-M”, hence, number with masculine and feminine marking are singular by default in Amharic.

Moreover, in most Semitic languages plural nouns are formed both by the addition of suffixes to the singular form, which is called “external” plural and by the modification of the pattern of vowels within which is called “internal” or “broken” plural. In some cases suffixes may also be added to an internal plural. These are two basic archaic pluralizing strategies in Semitic. For instance, Tigrinya uses both External plural and internal plural system. As Tewelde (2002: 55) pointed out that in Tigrinya there are two suffixes which are **-at** or **-tat** as in **səb** “man”, **səb-at** “men” and **gilama** “aim” **gilama-tat** “aims”. There are also internal plural forms in the language as in **fərəs** “horse” and **’afras** “horses”, **mənbər** “chair” **mənbər** chairs.

Similarly, Geez has also both external and internal plural marking systems. Geez has two levels of plural marking. The first one is plural with few numbers (i.e., paucal) and the second one is plural with many numbers (Zena Markos 1989: 12). Consider the following examples;

(1)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural (few number)	Plural (many number)
a.	dəbr	“Church type”	adibar	adibar-at
b.	libs	“clothe”	albas	albas-at
c.	riʔs	“title”	ariʔst	ariʔst-at
d.	ts’om	“fast”	ats’iwam	ats’iwam-at

Different level of number marking is a common phenomenon in some semetic languages. For instance, in Arabic plural may have different levels: **kalb** “one dog”, **kalbaani** “two dogs”, **kilaab** “dogs more than ten”, **?aklub** “few dogs three to ten” (Ignacio Ferrando 2002:1).

Geez adjective plural formation agrees with such analysis as pointed out by Zena Markos (1989).

(2)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	kibur bi?isi	“honorable man”	kiburan seb?	“honorable men”
b.	kibirt bi?isit	“honorable woman”	kiburat anist	“honorable women”

In Amharic, plural marking is shown by different strategies. These strategies are shortly discussed by Baye (2000: 112). The first one is suffixation. Suffixation is usually called formation of ‘sound’ plurals. Most often the plural marked by the suffix **-očč**. There are morphophonemic processes occurring at a morpheme boundary in the formation of plural number marking in Amharic. That is when the noun ends with vowel insertion of glides and deletion of final vowel occur. These may be motivated by syllable structure conditions. The other plural formation is by making internal changes the stem, which is referred to as formation of ‘broken plurals’, which might have Geez background. The final one is by reduplicating all or part of the stem of the noun.

Moreover, plural nouns also use plural agreement morpheme verb forms in Amharic. That means plural is also marked on verb stems. This may not be a common phenomenon in other Ethiopian Cushitic and Omotic languages. It is discussed under section (5.2).

Methodologically, the researcher employs different techniques of data collection techniques such as: eliciting different stories and conducting structured and semi-structured interviews with key informants and target group discussion related linguistic and sociolinguistic secondary data are also consulted. Further, the information includes native language competence of the researcher.

3 Number Marking in Amharic

In Amharic singular is not morphologically marked, whereas nouns are marked for plural. The common plural number marking in Amharic is suffixation. As most of natural languages, Amharic encompasses two types of nouns which are count and mass nouns. The count nouns plural form can be distinguished through

morphological suffix **-očč** while the mass nouns are not. The mass nouns is measured only by the number of the container it measures, for instance, **hulət birc'ik'o wuha** “two caps of water”. It doesn't make sense to say **hulət birc'ik'owocc wuha** “two caps of water”. Even in some instances the countable noun do not use plural suffix unless it is definite. For instance, **kəbədə jakket asir bIRR gəzza** “kebede bought a jacket by ten bIRR”. It is not possible to say, **kəbədə jakket asir bIRR-occ gəzza** “kebede bought jacket by ten bIRR”. On the other hand, if the bIRR is definite and plural, it used plural suffix. **yəkəbədə kis wust' yalut hulətu birocc təkədəwal**. “The two birrs in Kebede's pocket are damaged”. This shows that in Amharic there are some especial countable nouns which are not commonly used in the plural suffix but rather using plural number modifier to express their plurality. We will discuss the three strategies of plural number marking in Amharic below.

3.1 Suffixation

Suffixation is the most productive plural marking system in Amharic. The plural marker **-očč** is used to express plurality of nouns. In terms of the type of final consonant or vowel sounds alternation may occur in the process of suffixation. For instance, nouns ending in a consonant uses **-očč** without any addition or deletion of sounds as (3).

(3)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	lij	“child”	li.j-očč	“children”
b.	bet	“house”	be.t-očč	“houses”
c.	səw	“man”	sə.w-očč	“men”

On the other hand if the nouns ending in vowels (**-a**, **-o**, **-u**), the suffix takes the form **-wočč** as in (4).

(4)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	bə.re	“ox”	bə.re.wočč	“oxen”
b.	wif.ja	“dog”	wif.ja.wočč	“dogs”
c.	do.ro	“hen”	do.ro.wočč	“hens”

Sometimes it is also possible to delete the final vowel in the stem and form the suffix **-očč**. As in **bə.ročč** “oxen”, **wif.jočč** “dogs”, **do.ročč** “hens”. Whenever two

vowels come together in a word boundary the following morphophonemic processes may occur:

- a. deletion of the first vowel
- b. insertion of a glide between the two vowels
- c. If the first vowel is either back rounded vowel **o** or **u** labialization of the preceding consonant takes place.

Thus, the above examples have shown a kind of insertion of glides. Since deletion of vowel and insertion of glides are the common phenomena in Amharic it is also possible to present the above example in the following way: As can be seen in the above representation, the quality of the vowel /ə/ changes to [e] that it is a consequence of the spreading of a feature that is inherent in the deleted palatal glide /j/.

The insertion of glides or deletion of vowels is motivated by the syllable structure of the language. Since a sequence of two vowels is not permitted in the language at word boundary either a process of deletion or insertion of glides takes place.

There are some kinship-terms which have two plural forms with a slightly different meaning. The first one is the common plural form as shown in below;

(5)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	ʔihit	“sister”	ʔihitočč	“sisters”
b.	wəndim	“brother”	wəndimočč	“brothers”
c.	guwadəppa	“friend”	guwadəppočč	“friends”
d.	fikrəppa	“lover”	fikrəppočč	“lovers”

The second plural form has a slight different meaning as shown below;

(6)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	ʔihit	“sister”	ʔihitmamačč	“sisters of each other”
b.	wəndim	“brother”	wəndimamačč	“brothers of each other”
c.	guwadəppa	“friend”	guwadəppamačč	“friend of each other”
d.	fikrəppa	“lover”	fikrəppamočč	“lovers each other”

The examples given above show plurality with different morphophonemic structure. Moreover, the semantics poses a kind of reciprocal relationship between

the referents. If we make a plural form for the complex or compound nouns the plural marker may occur on the second half of the compound noun as (7).

(7)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	bet-məs'haf	“library”	bet-məs'haf-očč	“libraries”
b.	bet-məzkir	“Museum”	bet-məzkir-očč	“Museums”
c.	bet-kiristiyan	“Church”	bet-kiristiyan-očč	“Churches”

It is a regular plural marker in the language and always suffixed to a noun. There are, however, many nouns that have plural markers other than **-očč**.

3.2 Prefixation

Some plural forms is expressed in Amharic by using the prefix **ʔinnə-**. As Getahun (1997: 76) pointed out that such kinds of plural marking has different features as compared with the suffix **-očč**. He argued that the plural marker **ʔinnə-** occurs as a form of prefix on pronouns and proper nouns. It also expresses collectiveness of nouns.

Examples:

- a. **ʔinnə – antə**
ʔinnə antə mət't'atʃihu
“You (PL) came”
- b. **ʔinnə – irsu**
ʔinnə irsu mət't'u
“They came”
- c. **ʔinnə – izih**
ʔinnə izih mət't'u
“These came”
- d. **ʔinnə – iziya**
ʔinnə iziya mət't'u
“Those came”
- e. **ʔinnə – fantu**
ʔinnə Fantu mət't'u
“Those of Fantu’s came”
- f. **ʔinnə – work'u**
ʔinnə Work'u mət't'u
“Those of Work’u’s came”

As can be seen on the above examples (a–d), plurality is marked by the prefix **ʔinnə-**. Moreover, the last two examples e and f shows how **ʔinnə-** could mark

plural number prefixed to proper nouns Fantu and Work'u This means **ʔinnə-** expresses number more than one.

3.3 Broken plurals

Broken plural is a way of plural formation which consists of a change in the vowel pattern rather than the addition of a plural affix. According to the literature of Semitic languages these are called “internal plurals” or “broken plurals” (McCarthy and Prince 1995; Ratcliffe 1998; Bender 1976) to mention a few. Broken plural is highly productive in many Semitic languages such as Arabic, Geez and Tigrinya. On the contrary, in some Semitic Languages like Amharic broken plural is not productive though there are some Geez-based broken plurals. In other words, the broken plurals are not originally Amharic but they were borrowed from Geez and then they gradually became part of the Amharic lexicon (Hirut 1999).

There are many nouns which take markers borrowed plural suffix from Geez. The following are external plural suffixes: **-an**, **-at**, or **-t** to the singular noun.

(8)

	Singular	Plural	Gloss
a.	t'ə.bib	t'ə.bi.ban	“wise men”
b.	hi.s'an	hi.s'a.nat	“children”

In the above nouns the plural suffix **-at** and **-an** are added and the second syllable of the singular form CVC reduced to a CV type as the result of the coda changed to the onset of the next syllable due to the addition of the plural suffix **-an**.

On the above examples we have seen that how broken plurals change their syllable structure in addition to their vocalic change through the process of plural formation. The following are also additional examples shown in (9).

(9)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	məsfin	“duke”	məsafint	“dukes”
b.	kokəb	“star”	kəwakibt	“stars”
c.	məlʔak	“angel”	məlaʔikt	“angels”

These nouns use both internal and external plural marker as seen in the above examples (a, b and c). The same suffix **-t** is added in each singular noun to form a

plural noun. In addition to this, the word medial clusters in the singular form in (a) and (c) are broken by the vocalic element **a** in their plural forms but not in (b). Hirut (1999: 75) argues that unlike quadrilateral base root words, **kokəb** has a trilateral base; that is, **k-k-b** and due to the process of pluralization, a new consonantal element **w** is inserted, resulting in a quadrilateral root of the plural form. As opposed to her ideas **kokəb** is not treated as a tri-radical base in this paper since the underlying form is **kəwkəb** so that the broken plural form **kəwakibt** indicates the deleted underlying radical **w**. If we consider **k-k-b** as a tri-radical root, it may be against OCP since adjacent identical auto-segments are prohibited (McCarthy 1982: 147). Thus, the surface form **kokəb** is derived from the underlying form **kəwkəb**. Moreover, the vowels undergo a change in the final syllable of singular nouns. For instance, the vowel /ə/ in **kokəb** and the vowel /a/ in **məlʔak** are changed to /i/.

As Buckley (1997) pointed out the vowel /o/ may be derived from the underlying form of /əw/ in Tigrinya. Similarly, the surface vowel [o] is derived from the underlying form of /əw/ due to certain phonological processes in Amharic. Thus, the surface representation is **kokəb** which is derived from the underlying form **kəwkəb**. The broken plural system has taken the place of the underlying form of the noun (i.e., **kəwkəb** (SG) → **kəwakibt** (PL)). In the underlying form **kəwkəb**, the suffix **-t** is added, and the middle and final vowel ə replaced by **a** and **i**, respectively due to the nature of broken plural formation.

As can be shown in the above representation, the singular forms are characterized by word medial consonant clusters **sf**, **wk**, **lʔ** etc., which are broken by the vocalic element /a/ in their plural forms. The other types of broken plurals are illustrated below:

(10)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	kinf	“wing”	ʔə-knaf	“wings”
b.	libs	“clothe”	ʔə-lbas	“clothes”
c.	dəbr	“church”	ʔə-dbar	“churches”

The above tri-radical nouns consists the word final clusters in their singular forms. The prefix **ʔə-** is added in each form and the vocalic part is changed.

Although the above representation is Geez based plural type, it is used as a basic word in Amharic. Accordingly, it follows the rules of the Amharic language.

Although most of the Amharic word-initial gutturals are deleted, they regularly appear in the noun form.

Similarly by adding a prefix **ʔə-** and the vowel changes the singular form of a trilateral noun changed to plural form. It is exemplified as follows:

(11)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	ganen	“devil”	ʔəganint	“devils”
b.	təkil	“plant”	ʔətakilt	“plants”

As seen from the above examples, the singular form becomes plural by changing its vowel quality and affixation process.

Due to the processes of broken plural formation the vowel quality of the singular noun is different from that of the plural form. The following nouns have also a broken plural form.

(12)

	Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
a.	ʔənbəsa	“lion”	ʔənabis-t	“lions”
b.	ʔəmlak	“God”	ʔəmalik-t	“gods”

In these examples, the medial clusters of singular nouns are broken by the vocalic melody **a** in the plural form, and the sequence of three consonants in the plural noun is broken by the epenthetic vowel **i** to avoid an impermissible sequence of consonants.

As can be observed from the above examples, the process where epenthesis separates the last three consonants may be phonologically motivated due to the syllable structure of the language. The syllable structure conditions trigger the process whereby two vowels are deleted and then obligatorily replaced by the epenthetic /i/. As we discussed so far in section (3.3) number marking systems are originally Geez-based and very different processes compared to the other number marking systems using suffixing and prefixing of different markers.

3.4 Reduplication

By reduplicating all or part of the stem or the syllable of a noun or an adjective the plural forms are made in Amharic. For instance, the plural form of a noun can be formed by the total reduplication of the singular noun:

(13)

	Singular	Plural	Gloss
a.	t'ind	t'ind t'ind	“pairs”
b.	dar	dar dar	“edges”
c.	mata	mata mata	“every evening”
d.	t'əwat	t'əwat t'əwat	“every morning”

As one can see the words in example (13) above, plurality can be formed using complete reduplication of the stem.

There are also nouns that mark the plurality and variety of the nouns by total reduplication of their stem. The different phenomenon here is using a combining element /a/ between the repeated nouns. See the examples below in (14).

(14)

	Singular	Plural/Variety	Gloss
a.	sir	sirasir	“variety of roots”
b.	k'it'əl	k'it'əla k'it'əl	“variety of leaves”
c.	f ire	firaf ire	“variety of fruits”
d.	t'ire	t'irat'ire	“variety of cereal crops”

In the first two of the above examples, the syllable pattern of the nouns in the underlying forms have changed in the first part of the reduplicated noun as a result of the introduced vocalic element between them.

In the last example, however, the new vocalic melody between the reduplicated nouns is different. According to the rule of the Amharic language, when two vowels appear in a sequence, the first vowel is deleted. Thus, when the underlying noun ends with a vowel, the first vowel before /a/ should be deleted. Thus, the vowel /e/ is deleted in the above representation.

Adjectives also form their plural by reduplicating all or part of the radical or the syllable. This could be done by reduplicating the penultimate syllable suffixing **-t**, and changing vocalic elements:

(15)

	Singular	Plural	Gloss
a.	wəjzəro	wəjzazirt	“Mrs”
b.	konjo	k'onəjajit	“beautifuls”

The deletions of the above two vowels are triggered by the phonological process of the language on broken plural formation.

Some other adjectives may form their plurals by reduplicating their final radical and by suffixing **-t**.

(16)

Singular	Plural	Gloss
gobəz	gobəzazit	“clever clevers”

Moreover, by reduplicating the first half of geminate consonants the plural forms of adjectives can be realized. This kind of reduplication takes place by copying the first half of the geminate consonant and infixing the vowel **a**. The introduction of the vowel **a** between the copying consonants changes the syllable pattern of the word as shown below:

(17)

	Singular	Plural	Gloss
a.	tɪ.lɪk'	tɪ.lal.lɪk'	“big”
b.	tɪn.niʃ	tɪ.nan.niʃ	“small”
c.	k'əjj	k'ə.jajj	“red”

Furthermore, the stem of the whole syllable of adjective can be reduplicated, performing a total copying process as in (18).

(18)

a.	t'iru t'iruw ti.ja.ter	“the good plays”
b.	mət'.fo mət'.fo nə.gər	“the bad things”.

The above two adjectives **t'iru** “good” and **mət'fo** “bad” are repeated to show their plural forms. In addition, when we add the definite marker **-u** and accusative marker **-n** in the adjective that ends in a vowel, we insert glides between the two vowels so that the CVC syllable appears in the word final position. As we have discussed so far plural number marking in Amharic employ different strategies such as suffixation, pre-fixation, broken plurals, internal change and reduplication. Other word categories such as demonstratives, verbs, articles, adjectives, pronouns, nouns especially in possessive constructions, and others are marked for number in the language. We discuss about it in the next section.

4 Number agreement marking

Mostly number agreements found in demonstratives, verbs, articles, adjectives, pronouns, nouns especially in possessive constructions, complementizers and in some others categories. We will discuss some of these agreements in the following section.

4.1 Number marking in Demonstratives

In Amharic, there are number and demonstrative agreements. Plural nouns agree with plural demonstratives while singular nouns agree with singular demonstratives. The followings are some examples:

(19a). **ʔinəzih** **bet-očč** **adaddis** **naččəw**
 these house-PL new-RD-new COP-PL
 “These houses are new”

(19b). **yih** **bet** **addis** **nəw**
 This house new COP-SG
 “This house is new”

As can be seen in example (19a) the demonstrative **ʔinəzih** “these”, the adjective **adaddis** “new (PL)”, and the helping verb **naččəw** “are” all agree with the plural noun **bet-očč** “house +PL suffix -očč”. The same is true also for the singular noun **bet** as in (19b). The demonstrative **yih** “this”, the adjective **addis** “new”, and the helping verb **nəw** “is” agree with the singular noun **bet** “house”

4.2 Number marking in Verbs

The Amharic verb marking with number agreements, for instance if the noun is plural the verb express the plurality of the noun. Consider the following examples.

(20a). **lij- očč -u** **mət’t’-u**
 Child-PL-DEF come-PF-PL
 “The children came”

(20b). **liju** **mət’t’a**
 Child-DEF come-PF-3MS
 “The child came”

The plural noun agrees with the plural verb as in (20a). In this case the definite article **-u** is preceded by the plural marker **-očč**, while the definite article in (20b) appears alone. The morpheme **-u** which is suffixed to verb expresses the plurality of the noun in (20a) i.e., they came. Thus, the verb **mät't'u** in (20a) expresses plurality, while the verb **mät't'a** expresses singular noun **liju** “the child” “he came”. This clearly explains verbs are marked for number. Here are also some more examples concerning the plural and subject marker morpheme **-u**.

(21)

	Singular	Plural
a.	bəl-a ate-PF-he “He ate”	bəll-u ate-PF-they “They ate”
b.	gəb-a enter-PF-he “He entered”	gəb-u enter-PF-they “They entered”
c.	tət't'-a drink-PF-he “He drank”	tət't'-u drink-PF-they “They drank”

The following verb expresses the singular and plural actions based on the noun verb agreements.

(22)

	Singular		Plural	
a.	libs-u-n	lebs-o	libs-očč-u-n	lebabs-o
	cloth- POS-ACC	dress-CNV	cloth-PL- POS-ACC	cloth-CNV
	“Dressing his cloth”		“Dressing his cloth”	
b.	migb-u-n	k'ems-o	migb-očč-u-n	kemams-o
	food-he-POS	taste-CNV	food-PL-he-POS	taste-R-CNV
	“Tasting his food”		“Tasting (again and again) the food”	

4.3 Number marking in Adjectives

Amharic adjective modifies the noun preceded by it. The adjective makes number agreements with the noun it modifies. If the noun is plural, the adjective is also used in its plural form. The followings are some examples.

- (23a). **kəbədə** **tilalik'** **bet- očč** **gəza**
 Kebede big-RD-big house-PL buy-PF
 “Kebede bought big houses”
- (23b). **kəbədə** **til-lik'** **bet** **gəza**
 Kebede big-RD house buy-PF
 “Kebede bought big house”
- (24a). **kəbədə** **ad-adis** **bet-očč** **gəza**
 Kebede RD- new house-PL buy-PF
 “Kebede bought new houses”
- (24b). **kəbədə** **addis -bet** **gəza**
 Kebede new-house buy-PF
 “Kebede bought a new house”

4.4 Number marking in Demonstrative Pronouns

Amharic demonstrative pronouns agree with head nouns. If we have a plural head noun, the demonstrative pronoun that modify the head should agree in number and gender as seen below in (25).

Examples:

- (25a). **ʔissu** **lij**
 he child
 “That child”
- (25b). **ʔinnəssu** **lij-očč**
 they child-PL
 “Those (PL) children”
- (26a). **ya-čči** **lij**
 That-F child
 “That child”
- (26b). **ʔinnəziya** **lij-očč**
 those child-PL
 “Those (PL) children”

In the above examples the singular demonstrative pronouns agree with singular nouns as in (25a and 26a) while plural demonstrative pronouns agree with plural nouns as in (25b, 26b).

4.5 Number marking in countable and mass nouns

Most languages may have count nouns which have a singular and plural form, while their mass nouns are lacking the number distinction and having only the singular form (Corbett 2000).

In Amharic similar phenomenon is observed. The count nouns have plural form while the singular is unmarked, while the mass nouns have only the unmarked singular not plural form as in the examples below.

Count nouns

- (27a). **sost lij-j-očč**
three child-PL
“Three children”
- (27b). **hullət bet-očč**
two house-PL
“Two houses”
- (27c). **simint səw-očč**
eight man-PL
“Eight men”

As can be seen in the above examples the plural number agrees with the plural nouns which marked by the plural morpheme **-očč**.

Mass nouns

- (28a). **sost birc’k’o wuha**
three bottle water
“Three cups of water”
- (28b). **hullət sini bunna**
two cup coffee
“Two cups of coffee”
- (28c). **simint jonya sinde**
eight sacke wheat
“Eight sacks of wheat”

Since the mass noun is not countable, we do not use the plural marker **-očč** attaching to the head noun but but to the containers **birc’k’o**, **sini**, **jonya** or in the mass nouns such as **wuha**, **bunna** and **sinde**. It is ungrammatical to say:

hullət siniw-očč bunna “two cups of coffee” or **hullət sini bunnaw-očč** “two cup of coffees”

5 Some instance of double number marking in Amharic

As we have discussed so far Amharic has three ways of plural formations. The first one is the common plural suffix **-očč** and the other one is Geez based plural formation which is called broken plurals. Finally, it employs reduplication of nouns or adjectives to express plurality. However, some common mistakes are observed in Amharic plural formation. This problem is never been treated well so far to the best of my knowledge. Hirut (1999) mentioned a few points about this redundant form of Amharic plural in her article which discusses about Geez based Amharic plural nouns. As Hirut (1999: 90) “it is not uncommon to hear speakers using words like **k’onəjajitočč**, **ʔamalikt-očč** etc, in which there is a redundant plural marker in a noun which has already been pluralized.”

In this paper we discuss a bit detail concerning the redundant plural forms of Amharic. Moreover, we will also argue why the speaker makes such kinds of mistake in his conversation.

First let us describe the points and later we will argue why such kinds of mistakes occur. Some speakers of Amharic make a mistake by using two different forms for the same propose. The following are the plural forms which have distinct plural forms in Amharic and Geez however some use the combined form and yield a redundant plural formation. The following example demonstrates both the Amharic and Geez plural forms which bring unnecessary mistakes.

(29)

Word stems	Amharic PL	Geez PL	double form	Gloss
məs’haf	məs’haf-očč	məs’haf-t	məs’haf-t-očč	“books”
k’es	k’es-očč	k’es-awst	k’es-awst-očč	“Revered”
dərasi	dərasi-wočč	dərasi-yan	dərasi-yan-očč	“writers”
gədam	gədam-očč	gədam-at	gədam-at-očč	“monasteries”
kahin	kahin-očč	kahin-at	kahin-at-očč	“Priests”
məsfin	məsfin-očč	məsafin-t	məsafin-t-očč	“dukes”

As can be seen on the above examples, using the plural forms that contain both the Amharic and Geez plurals are redundant forms. Although double plural formation is common in oral form, there are some incidences seen in written form.

Concerning this, Fikre (2000: 5-6, 19)² pointed out that on T'ir 10/2000 Ethio-Chanel news paper publication on page 5 they use the plural suffix **-očč** on the already plural noun **shumamint** “appointees”, which produce the double plural nouns **shumamint-očč** “appointees”. Here the singular form of this noun is **jum** “appointee”. He also mentions that on the same news paper on Yekatit 29/2000 publication on page 19 the writer makes the same mistake i.e, **k'alat** ‘words’ which is plural noun taken as singular and the plural marker **-očč** is suffixed on it and produced the double plural **k'alat-očč**. Here the singular form of this noun is **k'al** “word”.

We would propose three hypotheses to argue the reasons why people commit such error. First we can argue that this problem happens from the point of view of Geez background knowledge of the Amharic speaker. As we observe the problem occurs on Geez based plural forms. We can classify Amharic native speakers into two as speaker with Geez background and without. The first groups who have Geez background knowledge never make such grammatical error because they are already familiar with the Geez plural form so that they do not pluralize secondly if once the word is pluralized. However, Amharic native speakers with no Geez background commit such grammatical errors because they are not aware of whether the nouns are already pluralized in Geez. Thus, they consider the pluralized noun as if it is singular and use Amharic plural marker.

The second problem may be due to the generic plural form of Amharic may confuse the Amharic speaker when they found Geez based plural noun without the suffix **-očč**. For instance, in Amharic the plural form can express with or without **-očč** in the presence of number modifier.

(30a). **kəbədə** **asir** **bəg** **gəzza**
kebede ten sheep buy-PF
“Kebede bought ten sheep”

(30b). **kəbədə** **asir** **bəg-očč** **gəzza**
kebede ten sheep-PL buy-PF
“Kebede bought ten sheep”

Similarly, when they found the already plural Geez based noun they add plural suffix **-očč** as shown below;

² Fikre is a Geez student of Dr. Sirgiw Gelaw. The above materials are taken from his BA Thesis.

(31a). **kəbədə asir mäs’ahift gəzza**
kebede ten book buy-PF
“Kebede has bought ten books”

(31b). **kəbədə asir mäs’ahift-očč gəzza**
kebede ten books-PL buy-PF
“Kebede bought ten sheep”

As can be seen in the above example (31b) the Geez based plural form **mäs’ahift** used the plural morpheme **-očč**, which is redundant.

As we discussed in the previous examples frequently Amharic speakers omit the plural suffix in presence of number modifier. The followings are more examples;

(32a). **sost lij ?allat**
three child have
“She has three children”

(32b). **hullət bet sərra**
two house build-PF
“He built two houses”

(32c). **simint səw motə**
eight man died
“Eight men died”

The very common and standard ways of plural expressions are **sost lij-očč ?allat**, **hullət bet-očč sərra**, **simint səw-očč motu**, “She has three children”, “He built two houses”, “Eight men died”, respectively. However, still the examples 32a-32c is grammatical as opposed to English or other languages. Thus, in Amharic due to the generic nature of most Ethiopian languages, the Amharic speaker sometimes make confusion number nouns agreements and used plural number with singular nouns to express the plurality.

The third one is may be the plural nature of the Semitic languages, which employs varieties of Plural system. For instance, in Geez plural form we observe that some nouns have two types of plural form (Zena Markos 1989). The singular noun **libs** “cloth” has two plural forms **albas** “clothes” and **albas-at** “clothes”. When we compare the two forms, the first plural form may contain two and a bit more number; while the second plural form contains very large number (see section 1). Thus, Geez has two ways of plural expressions few and more. However,

the Amharic speakers do recognize the differences but they do consider all are the same ones. This may motivate the Amharic speakers to use the plural morpheme **-očč** to any noun, which exist without it to express more number.

6 Conclusions

As we have discussed in this paper, Amharic number marking employs different strategies. Firstly, number is marked by the suffix **-očč**. Secondly, plural number marking is constructed by internal changes to the stem which is referred to as formation of ‘broken plurals’. Thirdly, number is marked by reduplicating all or part of the stem of the noun. Moreover, there are also different ways of plural marking techniques in the language. For instance, number agreement markers are found in demonstratives, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, nouns especially in possessive constructions, and in some others categories. The position of plural formation in compound nouns and the number agreements with different word categories of Amharic occurs to express plurality of nouns. The other interesting finding in this paper is the double use of pluralization in Amharic which has been discussed from the point of view of Geez background³.

People usually add the Amharic plural suffix **-očč** to all nouns whether it is already pluralized in Geez structure or not. The other problem may be due to the generic plural form of Amharic may confuse the Amharic speakers when they found Geez based plural noun without the suffix **-očč**. Hence, they simply add the plural suffix **-očč** on nouns where they have already Geez plural marker since most of them are Geez borrowed words. These are some of the facts that happened double plural marker in Amharic.

NB. Abbreviations used in this paper.

PL	Plural	SG	Singular
DEF	Definite	PF	Perfective
POS	Possessive	CNV	Con-verb
RD	Reduplication	COP	Copula
ACC	Accusative		

³ I came to this conclusion after I made thorough discussion with Dr. Sirgiw Gelaw, a Geez professor in Addis Aaba University who has been teaching and advising graduate and under graduate students for the last twenty years.

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