Which 'that' was Amharic yā-?
– An alternative origin for the Amharic relative-genitive marker

The Semitic relative formation has been the (sub-)topic of several pieces of recent research, e.g. Deutscher 2009; Huehnergard 2006; Hasselbach 2007; Watson and Retsö 2009; Holmstedt 2007, 2016 etc. In the most recent work challenging the previously accepted assumption of the Semitic relative marker (i.e. its originating from a demonstrative), Huehnergard and Pat-El (2018) argued to establish its origin from a semantically void adjectival element based on syntactic behaviors of its reflexes in descendent languages.

In previous scholarship on the origin of Semitic relative marker, the Amharic relative-genitive marker yā- enjoyed much less attention. Generally speaking, Gaʿaz relative zā- is taken to represent the Ethiopian branch and indeed z is easily derivable from Proto-Semitic *ḏ – the consonant in Proto-Semitic demonstrative and in relative marker of (at least)Proto-West Semitic. As for Amharic yā-, many believed it to be directly related to Goʿaz zā-, e.g. Hetzron (1973, 1) and Kapeliuk (1988, 70), basing on a proposal going back to Praetorius (1879). Leslau (1987, 639), however, seemed not so certain about this: in his comparative notes for zā-, he only cited Praetorius’ (1879) proposal but indicated no agreement with it. In fact, elsewhere Leslau (1956, 48) already speculated a connection between Gafat genitive yā- and Goʿaz preposition lā- rather than zā-.

In Old Amharic, we only find yā- for the relative-genitive marker (Girma Awgichew 2017, 82, 144), while no z-form is attested, even though palatalization could have been easily recorded in writing. The relative form żā (‘N’) is attested in one dialect of Tigrinya (Praetorius 1874). Praetorius (1879, 126) compared it with Goʿaz (zą-) and Amharic (yā-), and postulated a diachronic change *zā- > yā- via an intermediate *żā-. It is worth noting that Praetorius (1874) not only mentioned the żā- in Hamâsên Tigrinya, but also noted its alternative form lā- (Δ), which he considered to have derived from the leveled reduced marker for plural (Praetorius 1874, 441). Moreover, in the other dialect he investigated, Tabën Tigrinya, "hat nun der Gebrauch dieses Δ der Art zugenommen, dass es das alte ‘N’ so gut wie ganz verdrängt und dessen Stelle usurpirt hat" (Praetorius 1874, 446). Synchronically, in the phonological system of Amharic, we find palatalization process of ż → ż while 1 → y (Leslau 1995, 14). The alternation of ż and y seems to be only found in two dialects of Amharic (Shoa and Wollo), exemplified by the demonstrative-adverbial "here" (Zelealem Leyew 2007, 459); the regularity of this alternation is difficult to judge and the situation of the relative markers is unknown. Considering the attested leveling of plural relative marker with the 1-element, not only in the Tigrinya dialects as noted by Praetorius (1874), but also in Tigré (relative lā-), and many Modern Arabic varieties (relative ʿilli/āllī), this study attempts to argue for an alternative origin of yā- from a leveled plural marker *(V)lV via *(V) > y conforming to Amharic synchronous phonology.

References


------. *Die Amharische Sprache.* Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1879.

