

**Which 'that' was Amharic *yä*-?
– 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 *yä*- enjoyed much less attention. Generally speaking, Gə'əz relative *zä*- is taken to represent the Ethiopian branch and indeed *z* is easily derivable from Proto-Semitic **š* – the consonant in Proto-Semitic demonstrative and in relative marker of (at least) Proto-West Semitic. As for Amharic *yä*-, many believed it to be directly related to Gə'əz *zä*-, 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 *zä*-, 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 *yä*- and Gə'əz preposition *lä*- – rather than *zä*-.

In Old Amharic, we only find *yä*- for the relative-genitive marker (Girma Awgichew 2017, 82, 144), while no *ž*-form is attested, even though palatalization could have been easily recorded in writing. The relative form *žä* (ገ) is attested in one dialect of **Tigrinya** (Praetorius 1874). Praetorius (1879, 126) compared it with Gə'əz (*zä*-) and Amharic (*yä*-), and postulated a diachronic change **zä*- > *yä*- via an intermediate **žä*-. It is worth noting that Praetorius (1874) not only mentioned the *žä*- in Hamâsên Tigrinya, but also noted its alternative form *lä*- (ለ), which he considered to have derived from the leveled reduced marker for plural (Praetorius 1874, 441). Moreover, in the other dialect he investigated, Tabên Tigrinya, "*hat nun der Gebrauch dieses ለ der Art zugenommen, dass es das alte ገ 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 *z* → *ž* while *l* → *y* (Leslau 1995, 14). The alternation of *z* and *y* seems to be only found in two dialects of Amharic (Shoa and Wollo), exemplified by the demonstrative-adverbial "here" (Zealelem 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 *l*-element, not only in the Tigrinya dialects as noted by Praetorius (1874), but also in Tigré (relative *lä*-), and many Modern Arabic varieties (relative *illi/alli*), this study attempts to argue for an alternative origin of *yä*- from a leveled plural marker *(*V*)*lV* via **l* > *y* conforming to Amharic synchronic phonology.

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