

Possession at the Crossroads: The Exchange of EXIST and HAVE Possessives in Oromo and Amharic

Abstract

In Oromo, a Cushitic language of Ethiopia, existence and location are expressed by the verb **ɗʒir-** ‘exist/there be’, while possession is conveyed by the transitive verb **k’ab-** ‘have’. In addition, a locality-based predicate pattern with **ɗʒir-** appears in certain possessive constructions, and a more dynamic action-based predicate pattern involving the verb stem **k’abat-** ‘hold’ further grammaticalizes into possession (Wakweya, Desalegn & Meyer 2019). As a result, Oromo exhibits both the EXIST and HAVE Possessive types, which occur in peripheral contexts. The EXIST Possessive found in Oromo is not an independent development but a pattern borrowing from Amharic and Ethiosemitic languages. Meanwhile, the HAVE Possessive, which is almost non-existent in the whole Ethiosemitic, appears in Amharic, where the transitive verb **yaz-** ‘hold, seize’ functions as a possessive predicator when combined with an existential auxiliary (Baye 1997). This indicates the likely mutual feature exchange, with Oromo adopting the EXIST Possessive under Amharic influence and Amharic incorporating the HAVE Possessive under Oromo influence in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area.

Key words: exchange; possession; grammaticalization; comparative; periphrasis

1 Introduction

Oromo and Amharic are the two most widely spoken languages in Ethiopia, a country with more than 80 languages. Based on the number of native speakers, Oromo ranks first, with over 37 million speakers, some of whom are also found in parts of Kenya and Somalia (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2022). It is spoken across a vast area of central Ethiopia, extending toward the eastern, western, and southern borders within the regional state of Oromia. Amharic ranks second, with approximately 31.8 million native speakers (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2022), and is primarily spoken in the Amhara-regional state of north-central Ethiopia, which shares borders with Oromo-speaking areas. Despite being second in number of native speakers, Amharic holds broader national reach than Oromo, functioning as a lingua franca and serving as a second language for millions of Ethiopians across different regions.

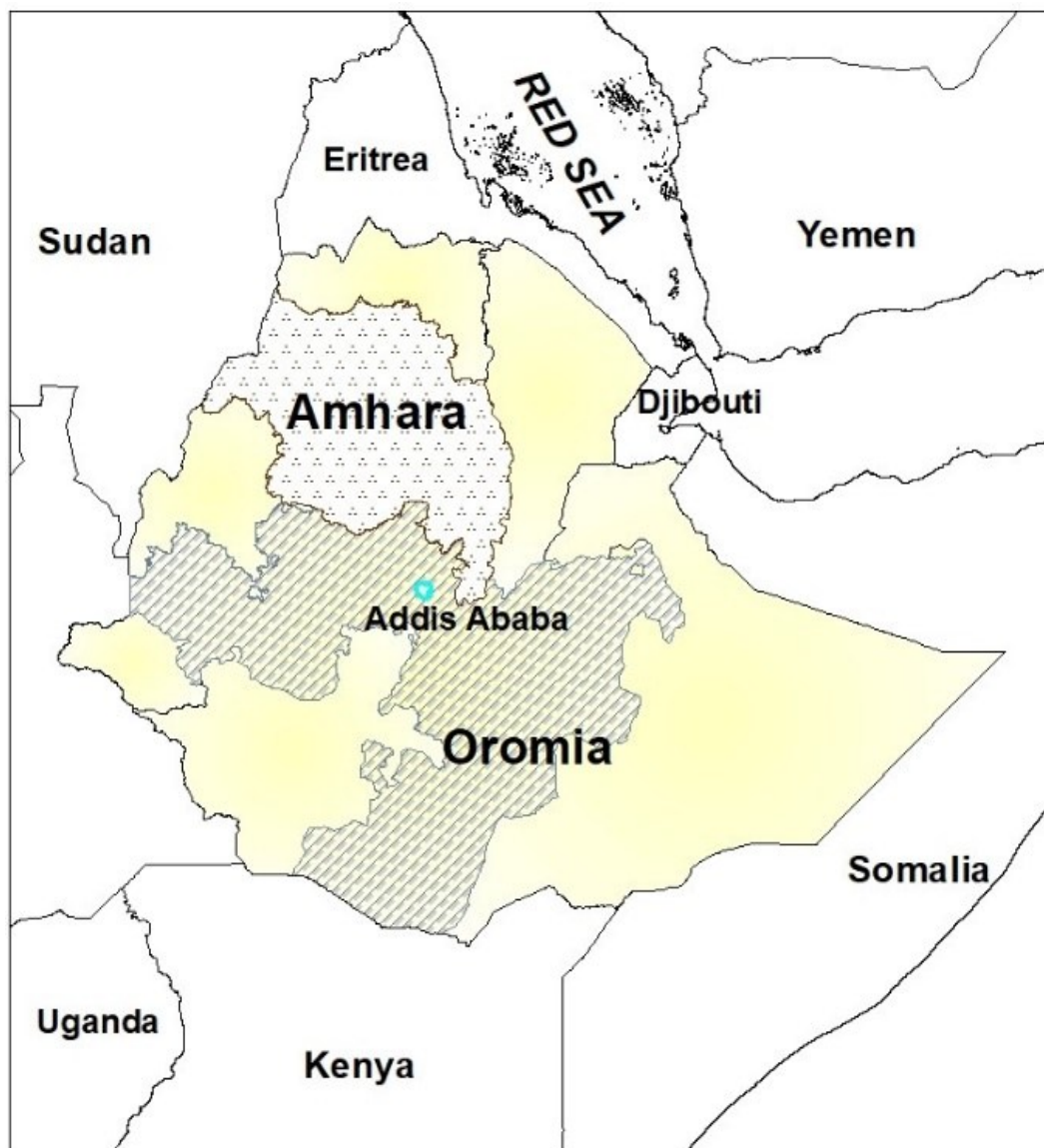


Figure 1: Map of Amharic and Oromo speakers' regions

Regarding genetic affiliation, Oromo belongs to the Cushitic and Amharic to the Ethiosemitic branches of Afroasiatic family. More specifically, Oromo is classified within the Lowland East Cushitic group, forming the Oromoid cluster along with the Konsoid subgroup (Banti and Shimelis 2023:257). In contrast, Amharic belongs to the Transversal South Ethiosemitic branch together with Argobba, Harari, and East Gurage languages (Hetzron 1972:119).

Both languages exhibit considerable dialectal variation. Oromo dialects include Wello, Rayya, Harar, Arsi, Bale, Tulama, Jimma, Wollegga, Illubabor, Guji, Borana, Orma, and Waata (Banti and Shimelis 2023:258). The Orma, Waata and parts of Borana are spoken across the border in Kenya. Amharic dialects are commonly

divided into four regional varieties: Gonder (Begemdir), Gojjam, Menz-Wello, and Shoa (Hudson 1997:457; 2009:594).

The data analysed in this paper are drawn from Western-Central Oromo (including the Tulama, Jimma, Wollegga, and Illubabor dialects) and from Shoa Amharic, the variety spoken in Addis Ababa and its surrounding areas.

In their verbal systems, Oromo and Amharic primarily distinguish between the perfective and imperfective aspects. Shimelis (2016) and Eba (2020) show that aspectual distinctions in Oromo are marked through suffixal conjugation, whereas Meyer (2016) shows that in Amharic, aspect is marked through root-internal consonant and vowel alternations within the Ethiosemitic aspectual system.

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (1) a. Obsaa-n sangaa **bit-e**
 Obsaa-NOM ox buy-3SG.M.PFV
 ‘Obsa bought an ox.’
- b. nuy-i har?a hodzii **dʒalqab-n-a**
 1PL-NOM today work begin-1PL-IPFV
 ‘We begin work today.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; personal knowledge)

- (2) a. kasa bet **gəzz-a**
 Kasa house buy.PFV-3SG.M
 ‘Kasa bought house.’
- b. bəg-ottf-u izzih **yi-wul-all-u**
 sheep-PL-DEF here 3SG.M-stay.IPFV-AUX.NPST-3PL
 ‘The sheep stay here.’

In Oromo, the perfective is typically marked by the suffix **-e** (1a), with **-i** as its variant, while the imperfective is marked by **-a** (1b), with possible variants **-u** and **-i**, which may depend on the syntactic subject (see Table 1). In contrast, Amharic marks the perfective through geminate stem consonants and vowel alternations (2a), and the imperfective with non-geminate consonants plus vowel patterns (2b).

Aspect	Oromo	Amharic
Perfective	-e, -i	geminate consonants + vowels
Imperfective	-a, -i, -u	non-geminate consonants + vowels
Perfect	Converb + AUX	Converb + AUX

Table 1: Aspect marking in Oromo and Amharic

There is an interaction between aspectual suffixes and subject indexing in both Oromo and Amharic. In Oromo, the perfective suffix **-e** occurs with 1SG and 3SG.M subjects without any overt subject indexing, leaving the subject implicit. With most other subjects, however, dedicated subject indexing is required, appearing before the aspect marker; moreover, **-e** does not occur with 2PL and 3PL subjects, where **-i** is used instead (Shimelis 2016:121; Eba 2020:201). In Amharic likewise, aspect marking correlates with subject indexing: in the imperfective paradigm, subject indexing is obligatorily expressed by both prefixes and suffixes, whereas in the perfective paradigm, subject indexing is expressed only by suffixes (Meyer 2016:170).

Beyond the morphological differences (agglutinative suffix stacking in Oromo versus root-pattern morphology in Amharic), both languages employ periphrastic predicates. These express the perfect (resultative) aspect by combining inflected converbs and existential auxiliaries. While converbs typically function in event-chaining and adverbial contexts alongside main verbs, they also combine with auxiliaries for the perfect aspect expressions (Griefenow-Mewis 2001:108; Meyer 2016:231). In such constructions, the converbs uniformly appear with the perfective aspect marking, while the auxiliaries specify the clause-level aspectual distinctions. According to Shimelis (2016) and Eba (2020), converbs serve as main verbs, followed by existential auxiliaries, marking present perfect or past perfect, as in (3&4).

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Shimelis 2016:125)

- (3) a. intal-ni bishaan **fid-d-ee** = (**dʒi**)r-t-i¹
 girl-NOM water fetch-3SG.F-PFV.CVB = AUX-3SG.F-IPFV
 ‘(The) girl has fetched water.’

¹ In Oromo, the converb and auxiliary may appear as separate elements (e.g., **fiddee dʒirti** ‘has fetched’) or in a merged form (e.g., **fiddee = (dʒi)rti**) in the present perfect, with the latter involving auxiliary encliticization. In Amharic, the merged option is more frequently used.

- b. intal-ni **deem-t-ee** **tur-t-e**
 girl-NOM go-3SG.F-PFV.CVB exist-3SG.F-PFV
 ‘(The) girl had left.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Leslau 1995:375,389)

- (4) a. wəndimm-e addisabəba **ders-o = all**
 brother-1SG.POSS Addis_ababa arrive-3SG.M.CVB = AUX.NPST
 ‘My brother has arrived in Addis Ababa.’
 b. dəbdabbe-w-n **lik-o-t** **nəbbər**
 letter-DEF.M-ACC send-3SG.M.CVB-3SG.M.OBJ AUX.PST
 ‘He had sent the letter.’

In both languages, present perfect is formed using the existential auxiliary: in Oromo, the auxiliary carries the imperfective aspect marker (3a), while in Amharic, it retains the original perfect form in its present time reference, a case of aspect reversal (Meyer 2016:230). The converbs in both languages appear as inflected verb forms. The past perfect is expressed through a converb plus suppletive existential auxiliaries marked with perfective suffix in both languages (3b,4b). Note that, in Amharic, subject index has been eroded from the auxiliaries, **all-ə** ‘exist.NPST-3SG.M.SBJ’ > **all** ‘exist.NPST’ in the present perfect and **nəbbər-ə** ‘exist.PST-3SG.M.SBJ’ > **nəbbər** ‘exist.PST’ in the past perfect, showing loss of the final vowel -ə through time.

These periphrastic constructions expressing perfect aspect occur exclusively in affirmative clauses. According to Meyer (2016), the converb plus the existential auxiliary pattern has undergone grammaticalization into a perfect aspect marker and is likely a contact-induced innovation within the Ethiopian Linguistic Area.

The role of existential auxiliaries in these aspectual constructions is particularly noteworthy, because the same verbs also serve as the basis for possessive predication in both Oromo and Amharic. In other words, the morphosyntactic mechanisms observed in the perfect aspect provide a useful backdrop for examining how the two languages encode possession predicatively.

2 The goal

This paper examines the periphrastic possessive constructions in Oromo in contrast with their corresponding forms in Amharic, not to emphasize divergence but to reveal how structurally similar constructions may reflect different genealogical origins or

pathways of contact-induced change. Specifically, it explores the parallels between two types of periphrastic possessive predicates: the HAVE Possessive, which employs a dynamic verb and an auxiliary, and the EXIST Possessive, which uses an existential verb in a locative construction. Both types are attested in Oromo and have structurally analogous counterparts in Amharic, as exemplified below:

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; own fieldwork)

- (5) a. boonsaa **bira** k'arfii-n **dʒir-a**
 Bonsa near money-NOM exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘Bonsa has money.’
- b. boonsaa-n k'arfii **k'abat-ee = (dʒi)r-a**
 Bonsa-NOM money hold.MID-PFV.CVB = AUX-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘Bonsa has money.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; own fieldwork)

- (6) a. kasa **ga** gənzəb **all-ə**
 Kasa near money exist.NPST-3SG.M
 ‘Kasa has money.’
- b. kasa gənzəb **yiz-o = all**
 Kasa money hold.IPFV-3SG.M.CVB = AUX.NPST
 ‘Kasa has money.’

The HAVE Possessive is rare in Ethiosemitic languages, where such forms are largely absent. In contrast, this construction is commonly attested in many Cushitic languages (Mous 2012: 399). Conversely, the EXIST Possessive, which uses an existential verb as the predicator, is characteristic of Amharic and other Ethiosemitic languages, though it also occurs in several Cushitic languages. As mentioned by Rapold and Zaugg-Coretti (2009:73), the use of existential verbs as possessive predicators in non-Ethiosemitic languages is likely the result of borrowing. Continued investigation into these patterns could provide valuable insights into language contact and typological convergence within the Ethiopian Linguistic Area.

It is worth noting that the term HAVE Possessive refers to predications involving a transitive verb meaning ‘have’, typically derived via action grammaticalization. It corresponds to Heine’s (1997:47) “Action Schema” and Stassen’s (2009:62) “HAVE Possessive”. In contrast, the label EXIST Possessive, which refers to the possessive

constructions built on existential verbs, is less common in the literature, though it is used by Creissels (2024:188) representing such forms.

In sum, while the EXIST Possessive appears to be inherited in Amharic and the HAVE Possessive is native to Oromo, the structural parallels (1a–b) and (2a–b) likely reflect mutual borrowing or convergent development arising from long-term contact. This paper, therefore, investigates whether the EXIST Possessive with a locative postposition in Oromo is replicated under Amharic influence, and whether the HAVE Possessive with an existential auxiliary in Amharic reflects influence from Oromo, within the broader context of more than five centuries of sustained contact.

3 Language contact in Ethiopia

The interaction between Ethiosemitic and Cushitic communities has spanned over 2,000 years, beginning with the expansion of Semitic-speaking people from the ancient Aksumite Kingdom (located in what is now northern Ethiopia) toward central Ethiopia. There are two main hypotheses regarding the origin of Semitic-speaking people in Ethiopia. The first hypothesis posits that Ethiosemitic speakers are descendants of South Arabian Semitic migrants who arrived in northern Ethiopia around the 1st century BC and subsequently expanded into the central regions (Gragg 1997:242). The second hypothesis suggests that a community with Semitic linguistic and cultural traits emerged locally from pre-existing populations in northern Ethiopia, largely expanding southward (Murtonen 1967:74). Weninger (2011) supports the latter hypothesis, arguing that it provides a more plausible explanation for the development of Ethiosemitic languages and communities.

3.1 Contact-induced changes in Ethiosemitic and Cushitic

In the initial stages of contact, Ethiosemitic languages were influenced by the local Cushitic languages, as evidenced by Cushitic loanwords in Proto-Ethiosemitic (Leslau 1945; 1952; Moreno 1948). According to Leslau (1945:59), the Semitic-speaking groups migrated from northern Ethiopia to the central regions, eventually establishing political control and introducing their language into a region already home to Cushitic languages, a linguistic presence that continues today. As a result, it is not surprising that the Ethiosemitic languages exhibit significant influence from the pre-existing Cushitic substratum. This initial unidirectional influence is often attributed to the

limited linguistic stability of the expanding Ethiosemitic-speaking populations, who adopted features from the more established local languages. However, several linguists, including Appleyard (1984), Crass & Bisang (2004), and Zelealem (2020) contend that feature diffusion is rarely one-way. While Cushitic influence was dominant in the earlier periods, Ethiosemitic languages, particularly Amharic, have begun to exert influence on Cushitic and other languages in later periods, an influence that continues today (Appleyard 1984:33; Rapold & Zaugg-Coretti 2009:59).

Around the 13th century, Amharic (an Ethiosemitic language) rose to prominence and eventually became the official language of the Ethiopian empire. Its subsequent political and economic ascendancy shifted the dynamics of influence, resulting in either a reversal of the direction, from Ethiosemitic to Cushitic, or to the development of mutual linguistic exchange (Zelealem 2020:320).

One notable outcome of Ethiosemitic influence on Cushitic languages can be illustrated by the adoption of structural patterns, a process Matras and Sakel (2007) term “pattern replication”, whereby languages borrow syntactic or morphological templates and integrate them with native lexical material. Crass (2007) discusses this phenomenon in K’abeena (Cushitic, HEC branch), spoken within the HEC–Gurage subarea of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area. For example, like Ethiosemitic languages, K’abeena marks the prospective aspect using a verbal noun followed by a copula.

K’abeena (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Crass 2007:94)

- (7) ani timhirtíta **ʃuuliiháa-ti.**
 1S.NOM study.ACC finish.VN.DAT-COP
 ‘I am about to finish my studies.’

Wolane (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Crass and Meyer 2008:241)

- (8) yihə timirt-eyə **tʃ’eresot-ən-eyə**
 1SG study-1SG.POSS finish.VN-COP.3SG.M-1SG.POSS
 ‘I am about to finish my studies.’

Although the languages slightly differ morphologically, dative marking on the verbal noun in K’abeena versus possessive marking in Wolane, Crass (2007:94) maintains that both constructions share the same structural pattern, i.e., combining a verbal noun with a copula to express prospectivity. This structural resemblance is most plausibly the result of Ethiosemitic influence through pattern replication.

Another notable example of pattern replication in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area involves the use of the quotative verb ‘to say’ in complex predicate constructions. Meyer (2009) and Leslau (1945) consider that Ethiopian languages commonly exhibit structurally parallel constructions where the verb ‘to say’ combines with invariable elements to express verbal actions. This pattern is observed across many Ethiopian languages, including Sidaama (Cushitic: HEC branch) and Amharic.

Sidaama (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Cerulli 1938:96 cited in Leslau 1945:72)

- (9) **hatto ya ma ya te?**
 this say.INF what say.INF COP.SG,F
 ‘What is this?’/Lit.: ‘this to-say what to-say is?’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Leslau 1945:72)

- (10) **yih *malət* min *malət* nəw?**
 this say.INF what say.INF COP.NPST.3SG.M
 ‘What is this?’/Lit.: ‘this to-say what to-say is?’

Leslau (1945) attributes such structural similarities to pattern borrowing, which suggests that Amharic adopted this construction under Cushitic substratum influence, particularly from languages like Sidaama. Indicating that the proto form of the quotative verb **bhl* ‘say’ is an inherited feature of Ethiosemitic languages, Meyer (2009) notes that its expansion and integration into complex predicate constructions likely developed under Cushitic influence. The quotative-based construction thus illustrates the intricate interplay between inherited structure and contact-induced innovation in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area.

Similar patterns have been attested in Oromo: the prospective aspect is likewise expressed through a dative-marked verbal noun followed by a copula, reflecting the Ethiosemitic influence (Crass 2007:95; Crass and Meyer 2008:242), and the verb ‘to say’ serves as an auxiliary verb in the compound verb forms used to inquire about someone’s activity or intent (Leslau 1945:72). Such structural parallels are unsurprising given the long standing contact between Cushitic and Ethiosemitic communities. In particular, Oromo speakers have been in sustained interaction with Amharic speakers since their expansion from the southern Ethiopia into the central and west-central regions in the early 16th century. This historical movement laid a foundation for a prolonged linguistic exchange between the two communities, both of which now hold dominant positions in Ethiopia’s sociolinguistic landscape.

3.2 Amharic and Oromo in contact

As noted in the introduction, Amharic is the most widely spoken second language in Ethiopia, a result of its historical dominance through political, social, cultural, and religious domains. In contrast, Oromo has not held such institutional power over other languages. Nonetheless, it is also spoken as a second language by several neighboring ethnolinguistic groups, particularly in the eastern and western regions of the country. For instance, some speakers of Gurage languages, which belong to the Ethiosemitic family, reportedly use Oromo as their second language (Meyer 2006: 815).

Due to their geographical proximity and long-standing socio-economic and political interconnections, many Oromo and Amharic-speaking communities are bilingual in these two languages. Hodson and Walker (1922: 8) observe that while almost all Ethiopians reportedly speak both Oromo and Amharic, many refrain from using Oromo in public, likely due to its historically lower sociolinguistic status. They further note that the prolonged interaction between Semitic and Hamitic² groups in Ethiopia, which is now more accurately referred to as Ethiosemitic and Cushitic, is reflected in the relationship between Amharic and Oromo. Given the centuries of sustained contact between these two dominant languages, it is reasonable to assume not only mutual linguistic influences between them but also their central role in the diffusion of areal features to other languages within their respective spheres of influence. As Crass and Meyer (2008:250) point out, both Oromo and Amharic have significantly contributed to the spread of Ethiopian areal features, further supporting the notion of reciprocal and outward-reaching contact effects.

Hayward (1991) examines the relationship between Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo (Omotic: Ta-Ne group) with regard to lexicalization patterns that reflect shared cultural concepts across these communities. He presents an extended list of lexical items, exhibiting similar lexeme-semantics relationship in the languages, interpreting this commonality as a defining areal feature of the region. Among the list of double-sense and multiple-sense lexicalizations are the verbs **k'abe** in Oromo and **yazə** in Amharic, both of which mean 'hold/catch, start/begin' (Hayward 1991: 149).

² The Hamitic group is an obsolete 19th-century classification that included Cushitic, Berber, Chadic, and ancient Egyptian languages, historically contrasted with Semitic within the then-called "Hamito-Semitic" family, now known as Afroasiatic (Greenberg 1963:42-48). In the context of Ethiopian literature, the earlier label "Hamitic" was used to refer to the Cushitic languages.

According to Hayward, these verbs show parallel semantic behaviours with their polysemous senses due to contact between the languages.

In addition to the extensive lexical parallels, Hayward (1991:40) mentions the possible syntactic similarities among Oromo, Amharic, and Gamo which also reflects a process of pattern replication specific to these languages. In a brief note aimed at addressing a research gap, Hayward suggests that such syntactic parallels maybe more telling than lexical borrowings (Hayward 1991:154). However, he does not specify the direction of influence, i.e., which language influenced which. One illustrative example is an expression used to indicate that someone narrowly escaped danger, literally translated as ‘he remained behind a little’. This notable construction as well as functional similarities are shown in Oromo and Amharic, the languages being examined in the present paper:

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Hayward 1991:140)

- (11) t’innoo-fee-tti **hafe**
 little-3SG.F.POSS-DAT remain_behind.3SG.M.PFV
 ‘He almost fell into some accident.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Hayward 1991:140)

- (12) lə-tinniʃ **k’ərrə**
 DAT-little remain_behind.3SG.M.PFV
 ‘He almost fell into some accident.’

In these languages, as seen in (11–12), the combination of the elements meaning ‘little’ and ‘remain behind’ render the meaning ‘almost’. These lexico-semantic and syntactic correspondences, found across genealogically distinct branches of the Afroasiatic family, suggest areal convergence shaped by sociolinguistic contact.

Building on these observations, this paper focuses on the emerging periphrastic possessive predications in Oromo and Amharic, shaped by their contact within the broader Ethiopian Linguistic Area. It seeks to identify features of mutual influence and pattern borrowing in the domain of predicative possession.

4 The Regular Possessive Constructions in Oromo and Amharic

Oromo and Amharic employ typologically distinct possessive strategies: Oromo exhibits the HAVE Possessive, whereas Amharic relies on the EXIST Possessive. The

non-periphrastic constructions discussed in §§ 4.1 and 4.2 constitute the respective default patterns in each of the two languages, while the periphrastic forms examined in § 3 function as supplementary alternatives.

4.1 Oromo and Cushitic

The HAVE Possessive of the Cushitic type is typically grammaticalized from action-denoting transitive verbs. Heine et al. (1991:154) note that possessive constructions whose predicator is derived from verbs denoting actions such as ‘hold’, ‘catch’, and ‘seize’ are found in many Cushitic languages. Historically, such constructions appear to have been even more widespread, particularly within the Ethiopian Cushitic subgroups. Oromo and several other languages still exhibit this HAVE Possessive, likely preserving the original Cushitic pattern (Crass and Meyer 2008: 246). As exemplified in (13–15), genetically and geographically related languages such as Oromo, Konso, and Girirra primarily employ the HAVE Possessive as their main strategy for possessive predication.

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; own fieldwork)

- (13) obbo lataa-n-faa mana guddaa **k’ab-u**
 Mr. Lata-NOM-ASSO house big have-3PL.IPFV
 ‘Mr. Lata and others have a big house.’

Konso (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Ongaye 2013:174)

- (14) iskatteeta-si? innaa a kutt-aa? **i-ḡap-t-a**
 woman-DEF child GEN be.big-P 3-have-3SG.F-IPFV
 ‘The woman has a grown-up child.’

Girirra (Afroasiatic, Cushitic, Somali dialect; Mekonnen 2015:184)

- (15) kadir ananki bahan **k’ab-Ø-i**
 Kadir child.M rude have-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘Kadir has a rude boy.’

The possessive verb roots **k’ab-** in Oromo (example 13), **ḡap-** in Konso (example 14), and **k’ab-** in Girirra (example 15) are cognates. These possessive predicators derived more specifically following the ‘hold’ > ‘have’ grammaticalization path, a trajectory that is cross-linguistically common, as noted by Kuteva et al. (2019:246-247). These

verbs exhibit inflectional irregularities, often employing suppletive forms to mark perfective aspect and/or future tense alternations.

The standard HAVE Possessive in Oromo, and Cushitic languages more broadly, expresses a range of possessive notions, including ownership, kinship, and body-part relations. Moreover, previous reconstructions of Proto-Cushitic possessive verbs indicated that archaic forms predominantly belong to the HAVE Possessive type (Ehret 1987; Hudson 1989; Sasse 1976; 1982).

Branches	Proto forms		Source
	HAVE	EXIST	
NC	* <i>b-r-y</i> ‘grasp, have’	-	Ehret (1987:14)
CC	* <i>cak-</i> /* <i>kem-</i> /(? * <i>k’ab-</i>) ‘hold, take’	-	Appleyard (2006:42,80)
HEC	* <i>k’ab-</i> /* <i>af-</i> ‘hold, catch, get’	-	Hudson (1989:69)
LEC	* <i>k’ab-</i> ‘hold, catch’	-	Sasse (1976:216; 1982:123)

Table 2: The proto-forms of the verb ‘to have’ in Cushitic

Cushitic languages spoken outside of Ethiopia exhibit exclusively the HAVE Possessive type. The Oromo-like verb **k’ab-** ‘have’ is historically found almost in the entire Cushitic languages, as shown in Table 2. Even in Central Cushitic (Agaw languages) that have a slightly distinct features from East Cushitic, some cognates of the verb **k’ab-** are attested in the extinct language Quara (Kemant dialect) and Bilin (Reinisch 1887a:865; 1887b:134).

Branches	Languages	Possessive type		Source
		HAVE	EXIST	
Cushitic outside of Ethiopia	Dahalo	+	-	Tosco (1991:63)
	Iraqw	+	-	Mous (2012:399)
	Alagwa	+	-	Mous (2012:399)
	Gorowa	+	-	Harvey (2018:393)
	Burunge	+	-	Kießling (1994:126)
	Rendille	+	-	Heine (1978:71)
	Yaaku	+	-	Heine (1974:57)
	Boni	+	-	Sasse (1982:123)
	Ma’a (mixed)	+	-	Mous (2003:40)

Table 3: EXIST and HAVE Possessives in Cushitic outside Ethiopia

Thomason (1983: 216) asserts that the HAVE Possessive is originally of Cushitic type, where it remains prominent. This is noticeable from the languages spoken outside of Ethiopia including the mixed language Ma'a or Mbugu (Cushitic + Bantu features) as in Table 3.

4.2 Amharic and Ethiosemitic

As noted in section 2, the HAVE Possessive is almost entirely absent from Ethiosemitic languages, with the notable exception of Gafat, where it was used alongside the EXIST Possessive. A more recent auxiliary-based HAVE Possessive has also emerged in Amharic (see example 6b). However, plain EXIST Possessive characterizes the whole Ethiosemitic languages. The verb root **hlw*³, which is among the Ethiosemitic innovations, occurs as the most common possessive predicator (Hetzron 1972:18; Raz 1997:455; Weninger 2011:1115). This verb comes with obligatory subject and object indexes in possessive constructions, as exemplified in (16–18) below.

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; own fieldwork)

- (16) wət't'at-ottf-u bizu məkina-ottf **allu-attfəw**.
 young_man-PL.DEF many car-PL exist.NPST.3PL.SBJ-3PL.OBJ
 'The young men have many cars.'

Argobba (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Wetter 2023:466)

- (17) inna-ʔen-im liḏ **hill-Ø-ajem**.
 AP-PRX-ʔTOP child exist.NPST-3SG.M.SBJ-3PL.OBJ
 'And he had also a child.'

Zay (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Meyer 2023:659)

- (18) ga:r-tʃa: ʔala^w-aha-n-u
 house-PL exist.NPST-3PL.SBJ-2SG.M.OBJ-FOC-DEC
 'You have (several) houses.'

The constructions of the EXIST Possessive type (examples 16–18) involve existential verbs marked with the subject and object indexes, and they represent a dominant pattern for expressing a wide range of possessive relations, such as ownership,

³ The Ethiosemitic verb root **hlw* was originally triradical, as seen in ancestral languages such as Ge'ez (cf. Mulusew 2014:8). In modern Ethiosemitic languages, however, it has lost its first and/or last consonant. The Amharic verb stem *allə* preserves only the middle consonant.

kinship, body parts in Ethiosemitic languages. A key feature of these constructions is the mismatch between the verbal indexes and the independent argument NPs: the possessor appears subject-like but is indexed on the verb as an object. As a result, it fails to meet the standard criteria for subjecthood in Ethiosemitic languages, which include the following properties:

- (19) a. zero case marking
b. clause-initial position
c. control of verbal subject index.

Among these three criteria, control of verbal subject indexing (19c) is the most decisive. However, in the EXIST Possessive constructions of the Ethiosemitic type, the possessor is indexed by the verb as an object, not as a subject, disqualifying it from full subjecthood despite its clausal position or case marking. Conversely, the object-like possesum receives subject index. Thus, these constructions defy the canonical subject-object alignment. Neither argument fully satisfies the prototypical properties of subject or object, making it challenging to categorize within existing typological frameworks such as those proposed by Heine (1997) or Stassen (2009).

Following Baye (1997) and Ahland (2009), basic insights can be grasped that the possessor is a recipient. While several previous accounts often attribute the indexing mismatch to the cross-linguistically irregular behaviour of possessive predicates, Ahland (2009) offers a more dynamic view that the possessor is acquiring the subject properties, though it has not yet fully assumed control over verbal indexing. This transitional status seems evident based on some older data items from Ge'ez (20) and old Amharic (21–22), where the possessor bears explicit OBL-DAT marker and points to an intermediate stage of development.

Ge'ez (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Mulusew 2014: 8)

- (20) halləw-ø-a məs'haf lə-saba
 exist.PFV-3SG.M.SBJ-3SG.F.OBJ book DAT-Saba
 ‘Saba has a book.’

Old Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Moreno 1940: 66)

- (21) lə-nigus-u fərəs **all-ə-w**
 DAT-king-DEF.M horse exist.NPST-3SG.M.SBJ-3SG.M.OBJ
 ‘The king has a horse.’

Old Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Bible 1874: Luk. 12:50⁴)

- (22) *lə-ine-mm yəmmi-t't'əmmək'at t'ĩmk'ət all-əttf-ገገ*
DAT-1SG-FOC REL-PASS.baptize.IPFV.3SG.F baptism exist.NPST-3SG.F.SBJ-1SG.OBJ
'I have the baptism which I will be baptized.'

These forms illustrate a diachronic shift from dative-marked topical possessors toward zero-marked grammatical subjects, a change that is more advanced in modern Ethiosemitic languages, where such DAT marking is no longer used. This older pattern is preserved in Ge'ez, a conservative Ethiosemitic language, which retains several older patterns typical of early Ethiosemitic (cf. Leslau 1945:61). The OBL-DAT possessor construction, as shown in (20), is likely one such preserved feature. More examples from old Amharic, such as (21–22), reflect an intermediate stage in this diachronic process. Here the possessor wants to acquire subject properties such as sentence-initial position and zero-markedness for nominative case, where still lacking full control over verbal indexing, as it remains cross-referenced by the object index.

A related language, Tigrigna, shows the same pattern as Amharic: the possessor NP occupies clause-initial position and is indexed by the verbal object suffix. Kifle (2011: 51) notes that the clause-initial possessor NP may optionally carry a dative object marker, indicating its recipient status.

Tigrigna (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Kifle 2011:51)

- (23) *(ni-)Yonas ʕabiʔur ʕallo-wu-wo*
(DAT-)Yonas bull.PL.M exist.NPST-3PL.M.SBJ-3SG.M.OBJ
'Yonas has bulls.'/Lit. '(For) Yonas, bulls exist.'

Like modern Amharic, Tigrigna no longer requires overt marking on the possessor NP; however, the optionality of this marker suggests that the shift toward subject is still incomplete. This aligns with the broader Ethiosemitic tendency for the possessor NPs in the EXIST Possessive constructions to occupy an intermediate grammatical role between canonical subjects and oblique arguments.

In summary, these EXIST Possessive constructions fall between two grammatical categories: they cannot be treated as HAVE-type, because the possessor does not control the subject index, nor are they canonical EXIST-type with OBL arguments.

⁴ The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in Amharic. London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1874. (Translated from the Greek Textus Receptus)

Instead, they represent a transitional or hybrid possessive alignment, a pattern particularly widespread among Ethiosemitic languages, and possibly reflect a shared evolution within the languages.

Branch	Languages	Possessive types		Source
		HAVE	EXIST	
North	Ge'ez	-	+	Mulusew (2014: 213)
	Tigrigna	-	+	Kifle (2011: 51)
	Tigre	-	+	Raz (1983: 50)
Transversal South	Amharic	-	+	Baye (1997: 619)
	Argobba	-	+	Hudson (1997: 477)
	Harari	-	+	Wagner (1997: 507)
	Zay	-	+	Meyer (2023: 659)
	Silt'e	-	+	Gutt (1997: 533)
Outer South	Muher	-	+	Meyer (2019: 249)
	Masqan	-	+	Ousman (2019: 38)
	Soddo	-	+	Hetzron (1997: 549)
	Gumer	-	+	Vollmin (2017: 193)
	† Gafat	+	+	Hetzron (1997: 549)

(Branches of Ethiosemitic adapted from Hetzron 1972:119)

Table 4: Distribution of EXIST and HAVE Possessives in Ethiosemitic languages

The languages listed in Table 4 commonly exhibit the cross-linguistically rare EXIST Possessive constructions, with the possessor's subject-object status puzzle, as shown in examples (14–16). The key distinction of predicative possession among Ethiopian languages lies in the type of predicate involved as HAVE versus EXIST verbs. In this regard, Gafat stands out as an exception since it employs the HAVE Possessive as an alternative construction to the earlier EXIST-based constructions. This innovation is likely attributable to intensive contact with Cushitic languages, which influenced Gafat earlier and more extensively than other Ethiosemitic languages. As noted by Hetzron (1972: 123), the Central and HEC languages exerted considerable influence on Gafat prior to other Ethiosemitic languages.

While the EXIST Possessive constructions of the Ethiosemitic type have often been overlooked in the cross-linguistic typologies, Global databases such as the Grambank and the WALS do include some data on the distribution of HAVE and EXIST-based

possession strategies in Ethiopian languages. Among these, the Grambank provides a relatively broader language sample with more detailed typological distinctions based on possessor and possessum encoding. In contrast, the WALS identifies only four Ethiopian languages regarding their dominant predication strategy, namely Oromo, Amharic, Bilin (Central Cushitic), and Kunama (often classified as Nilo-Saharan), as noted in Stassen (2013). This limited sample renders the WALS's coverage relatively narrow and less representative of the full typological diversity in the region.

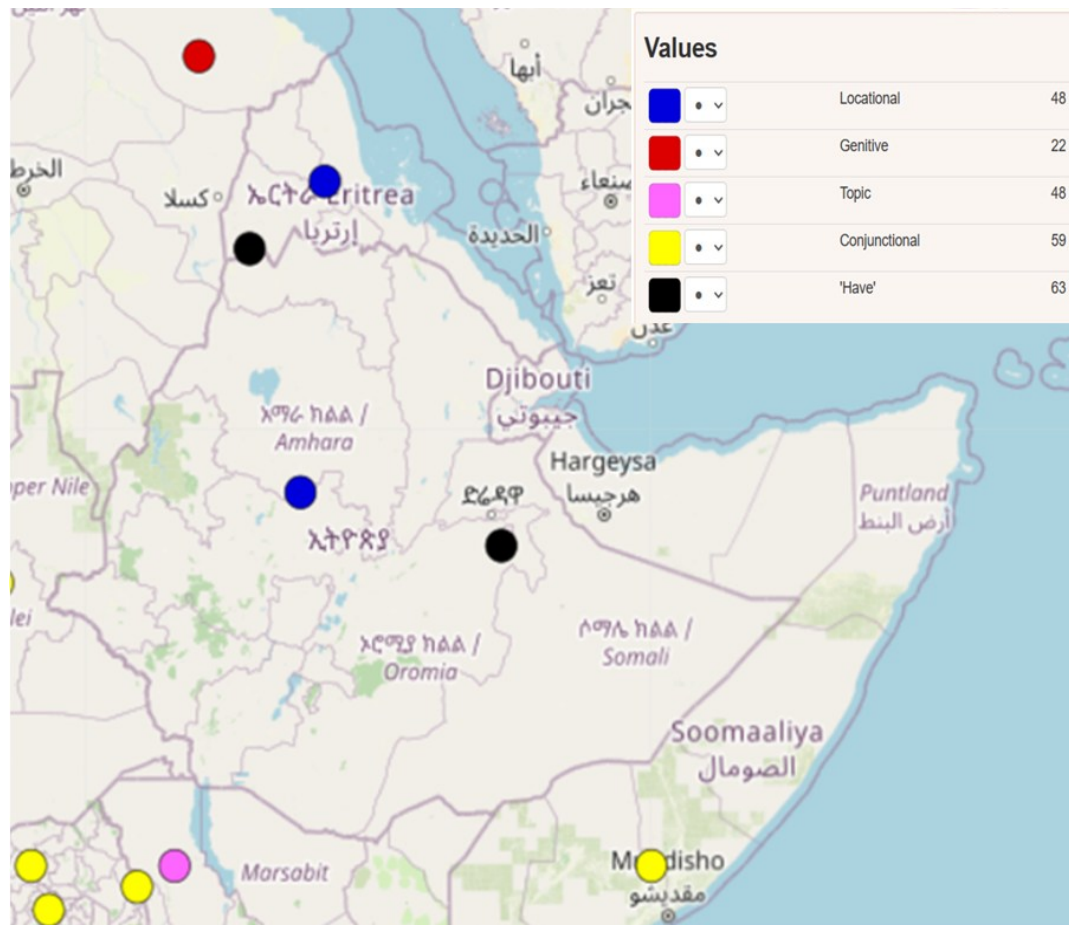


Figure 2: The HAVE and EXIST Possessives in Ethiopian languages from WALS.

WALS classifies Amharic and Bilin (represented by blue icons) as EXIST Possessive languages, while Oromo and Kunama (represented by black icons) are said to be the HAVE Possessives languages. However, this binary classification obscures the fact that several Ethiopian languages exhibit both possessive strategies. For instance, Bilin has been shown to employ both HAVE and EXIST Strategies (Palmer 1965; Hetzron 1976), suggesting a more nuanced and flexible system of possessive predication than is captured by WALS.

5 Periphrastic possessive constructions in Oromo and Amharic

Apart from the Cushitic-type plain HAVE Possessive and the Ethiosemitic-type plain EXIST Possessive, Oromo and Amharic also exhibit shared periphrastic alternatives of predicative possession. These develop through grammaticalization pathways distinct from those of the plain forms (discussed in sections 4.1 and 4.2). The HAVE-type periphrases correspond to cross-linguistic resultative-perfect constructions (Kuteva et al. 2019: 320), while the EXIST-type periphrases, incorporating a postpositional element, are built on locational constructions expressing availability (Stassen 2009: 324; Kuteva et al. 2019: 129-130).

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (24) a. **k'abat-** 'hold, catch' + AUX > 'have'
 b. **bira** 'near/at' + **dʒira** 'exists/there be' > 'have'

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; personal knowledge)

- (25) a. **yazə** 'hold/catch' + AUX > 'have'
 b. **ga** 'near/at' + **allə** 'exists/there be' > 'have'

The HAVE-type periphrases in (24a) and (25a) combine dynamic action verb with an existential auxiliary, here termed as Auxiliary Periphrases (henceforth AUX-Periphrases). The EXIST-type periphrases in (24b) and (25b) consist of an existential verb plus a postpositional phrase, often with an oblique-marked possessor, and are referred to as Postpositional Periphrases (henceforth PP-Periphrases), following the terminology introduced by Heine and Reh (1984:115).

In Oromo, the verb stem **k'abat-** is derived from **k'ab-** 'hold' plus the middle voice marker **-at**, resulting in the meaning 'hold or catch for oneself'. This dynamic verb is morphologically distinct from the homophonous stative possessive verb **k'ab-** 'have' (Wakweya et al. 2019). The two are unrelated etymologically, the similarity being coincidental. A parallel also found in Somali, another Cushitic language.

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (26) a. nam-ittf-i fardeen tʃ'ittf'imoo **k'ab-a**
 man-DEF.M-NOM horse.PL strong have-3SG.M.IPFV
 'The man has strong horses.'

- b. poolisii-n kun hattoota sadii **k'ab-e**
 police-NOM this.NOM thief.PL three catch-3SG.M.PFV
 'This policeman caught three thieves.'

Somali (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Green et al. 2015: 336, 383)

- (27) a. cudur-ra = da xun **k'ab-a**
 ailment-PL = T.DEF badness have-PRES
 'The bad diseases'/Lit.: 'The diseases that have badness.'
- b. libaax weyn baa wiil = i **k'ab-at-Ø-ay.**
 lion big FOC boy = TOP seize-MID-3SGM-PST
 'A boy caught a big lion.'

In Somali, recent studies (Green et al. 2015; Green 2021) identify distinct verbs for possession (**k'ab-**, qabayya 'have') and dynamic action (**k'ab-**, **k'abó/k'abán** 'hold, catch'), each with different grammatical characteristics, already noted by Larajesse (1897:74) as separate lexical entries. As in Oromo, the possessive verb shows highly limited inflectional behaviour, whereas the dynamic action verb is fully inflectional like other regular verbs (Green 2021:445-448). This contrast does not challenge the view that possessive verbs in these languages developed from transitive action verbs, a grammaticalization pathway commonly attested across Cushitic languages. It rather suggests that the present possessive verb followed a distinct grammaticalization pathway, separate from that of the co-existing dynamic action verb. The difference between the two verbs lies not only in morphological and functional constraints, but also in the morphological systems they select, as shown in Table 5.

Language	stem	Meaning	Inflectional properties					
			INF	MID	PFV	IPFV	IMP	CVB
Oromo	k'ab-	HAVE	[-aattʃuu]	[-aat]	-	+	-	-
	k'ab-	HOLD	[-uu]	[-at]	+	+	+	+
Somali	k'ab-	HAVE	[-i]	?	-	+	-	-
	k'abó	HOLD	[-an]	[-at]	+	+	+	+

(Sources: for Somali, Saeed 1999; Green et al. 2015; for Oromo, personal knowledge)

Table 5: Morphological properties of the possessive verb **k'ab-** 'have' and the homophonous dynamic action verb **k'ab-** 'hold, catch' in Oromo, compared with Somali

Possessive verbs cross-linguistically exhibit morphosyntactic irregularities. Examples include non-passivisability of ‘have’ in English, incompatibility with perfective inflection in Oromo, also in existential verb **dʒir-** (Griefenow-Mewis 2001: 92–94), absence of a negative form in Xamtanga, replaced by a suppletive verb (Appleyard 1984: 498), and perfect forms expressing present-time reference in Tigre, also in existential expressions (Raz 1997:456). In Oromo, however, the possessive verb **k’ab-** displays properties that go beyond these typical irregularities, suggesting a distinct etymological origin from the homophonous dynamic verb.

Thus, the dynamic action verbs (**k’ab-** in Oromo, **yaz-** in Amharic) combining with existential auxiliaries, and existential verbs (**dʒir-** in Oromo, **allə** in Amharic) occurring with locative postpositions represent recent grammaticalization pathways toward possessive forms. Both these HAVE-based and EXIST-based periphrases develop possessive meanings via their association with the notion of availability.

5.1 Auxiliary Periphrasis

As briefly introduced in section 1, the aspectual periphrastic predicates involving a converb as the main verb and an existential verb as the auxiliary is cross-linguistically valid (Haspelmath 1995:43). In Oromo and Amharic, such periphrastic predicates typically consist of an inflected converb followed by an existential auxiliary that marks perfect (resultative) aspect. In the possessive contexts, the converb forms of the verbs like ‘hold, catch’ combine with the existential auxiliaries.

In Oromo, the dynamic verb **k’abat-** ‘hold, catch’ as a converb combining with the verb **dʒir-** express possession both of which bear aspect markers and subject indexes. These periphrastic constructions are typically used in the present perfect verb form for possessive reading, and they exclusively occur in the affirmative main clauses, as shown in (28) below.

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (28) a. boontuu-n k’arfii **k’abat-t-ee = (dʒi)r-t-i**
 Bontu-NOM money hold.MID-3SG.F-PFV.CVB = AUX-3SG.F-IPFV
 ‘Bontu has money.’
- b. gurb-ittf-i hodʒii **k’abat-ee = (dʒi)r-a**
 boy-DEF-NOM job hold.MID-3SG.M.PFV.CVB = AUX-3SG.M-IPFV
 ‘The boy has a job.’

- c. eddʒennoo walfakkaatu **k'abat-n-ee = (dʒi)r-n-a**
 stand same hold.MID-1PL-PFV.CVB = AUX-1PL-IPFV
 'We have the same stand.'

In Amharic likewise, the converb form of the verb **yaz-** 'hold, catch' combining with the auxiliary **allə** renders possessive meaning. The HAVE Possessive is infrequent in Amharic and occurs as a context-based alternative construction of the plain EXIST Possessive construction (Baye 1997). These special possessive constructions as in (29a–c) resemble the Oromo-type constructions given in (28a–c), respectively. The possessive predication involves the dynamic action verb, which appears as a converb, and the existential auxiliary as a perfect aspect indicator.

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; personal knowledge)

- (29) a. lij-u sira **yiz-o = all**
 boy-DEF job hold.IPFV-3SG.M.SBJ.CVB = AUX.NPST
 'The boy has a job.'
- b. təməsasay ak'uam **yiz-en = all**
 same stand hold.IPFV-1PL.CVB = AUX.NPST
 'We have the same stand.'
- c. issua masreja **yiz-a = all-əttʃ**
 3SG.F evidence hold.PFV-3SG.F.SBJ.CVB = AUX.NPST-3SG.F
 'She has an evidence.'

These constructions are not compatible with inalienable possession expressions.⁵ When used with kinship terms, the verb meaning 'hold, catch' retains its original meaning, as illustrated in (30) for Oromo and in (31) for Amharic. Note that the use of hash (#) indicates the incompatibility of the constructions in the intrinsic possessive interpretation.

Oromo (Afroasitic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (30) #boontuu-n mutʃ'aa **k'abat-t-ee = (dʒi)r-t-i**
 Bontu-NOM child hold.MID-3SG.F = AUX.3SG.F.IPFV
 'Bonti has held a child.'

⁵ The alienable–inalienable possession distinction is not grammatically encoded in these languages. It remains a conceptual categorization, though certain constructions may disfavour typical inalienable possession contexts.

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; personal knowledge)

- (31) #aster lij **yiz-a = all-əttʃ**
Aster child hold.IPFV-3SG.F.SBJ = AUX.NPST-3SG.F
'Aster has held a child.'

The constructions in (30&31) indicate that the subjects are merely holding a child, without specifying whose child it is.

In other Cushitic languages, such as Bayso, which is genetically close to Oromo, the HAVE Possessive with a periphrastic predicate pattern is observed, as in (32). This contrasts with the simple inflectional verb 'have', as in (33). Similar to Oromo and Somali (as discussed in section 2.3), the constructions in Bayso involve possessive predication utilizing the inflectionally versatile verb **ab-**, which often means 'hold' and conveys temporary possession. Meanwhile, the homophonous verb **ab-** 'have' functions as a dedicated possessive verb.

Bayso (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Hayward 1978:564)

- (32) fifiyo **ab-e-wa**
toothstick hold-3SG.M.PFV-AUX.PRS
'He has a stick (for cleaning teeth).'

Bayso (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Haberland and Lamberti 1988:158)

- (33) ani gange **aba**
1SG.NOM mule have.1SG.IPFV
'I have a mule.'

In Bayso, the combination of the verb **ab-** 'hold' and the auxiliary **-wa** is no longer synchronically analysable as a sequence of separate elements. The resulting verb form is more synthetic than the corresponding patterns in Oromo and Amharic. Therefore, the notion of periphrasis in Bayso applies only from a diachronic perspective.

Within the grammaticalization of possessive verbs from transitive actions, cross-linguistic evidence shows that the verbs meaning 'hold', 'seize', and 'take' often develop into the verb 'have' (Kuteva et al. 2019:422). In line with these pathways, the periphrastic constructions combining verbs such as 'hold' and 'take' with an auxiliary are also common in Cushitic, especially within the Central branch. Appleyard (1975: 342; 1987:498) observes that expressions for 'I have' in Kemant and

Xamtanga derive from earlier perfect constructions meaning ‘I have taken’, as illustrated in (34) and (35), respectively.

Kemant (Afroasiatic, Cushitic, Central branch; Appleyard 1975:342)

- (34) bəzu farzə ʃəw-an-ək^w
 many horse take-1SG-AUX.IPFV
 ‘I have many horses.’

Xamtanga (Afroasiatic, Cushitic, Central branch; Appleyard 1987:498)

- (35) an ʃak^{wə} lik^w s’ay-k^wun
 1sg.NOM three cow.PL take-AUX.1SG.IPFV
 ‘I have three cows.’

The recent grammaticalization of ‘hold’ > ‘have’ in periphrastic possessive forms in Oromo and Amharic supports the assumption that possession can arise from the consequences of past actions like *John has held money* > *John has money*. (Lyons 1967; Creissels 1996). This pathway aligns with the Cushitic typological pattern. At the early stages of grammaticalization, these verbs are semantically flexible, shaped by discourse context and oscillating between their original meanings (‘hold’, ‘take’, ‘seize’) and an extended possessive reading. As Lorenz (2016:493) notes, such perfect verb forms initially convey temporary possession alongside their original eventive meanings, with interpretation varying according to pragmatic contexts.

Although the middle-marked verb stem as **k’abat-** and the existential auxiliary **dʒir-** can appear independently, they are often fused into unified phonological verb forms, with some auxiliary elements being omitted. This type of auxiliary merging is common across several Cushitic languages, such as Bayso, Kemant, and Xamtanga (see examples 32–33). In Oromo, the auxiliary verb encliticization is an available option (example 36), but it occurs more frequently in Amharic (example 37).

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (36) boontuu-n k’arfii k’abat-t-ee = (dʒi)r-t-i
 Bontu-NOM moneyhold.MID-3SG.F-PFV.CVB = AUX-3SG.F-IPFV
 ‘Bontu has money.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (37) aster gənzəb yiz-a = all-əttʃ
 Aster money hold.IPFV-3SG.F.CVB = AUX.NPST-3SG.F
 ‘Aster has money.’

In these merged verb forms, the auxiliary undergoes phonological reduction: in Oromo, **dʒir-** may lose its initial syllable, retaining only **-r**; in Amharic, **allə** may drop its final subject index, surfacing as **all-** with subjects other than 3SG.F and 1SG.

This optional merging does not apply to past perfect constructions. In such cases, the auxiliary **tur-** in Oromo and **nəbbər** in Amharic remain independent and do not encliticize to the preceding converb. Moreover, the periphrastic constructions involving these past auxiliaries are not typically used to express possession in either Oromo or Amharic. This is likely because possessive constructions favour present perfect interpretations, which emphasize current relevance, whereas past auxiliaries contribute to a retrospective or completed meaning that is less compatible with the semantic of possession.

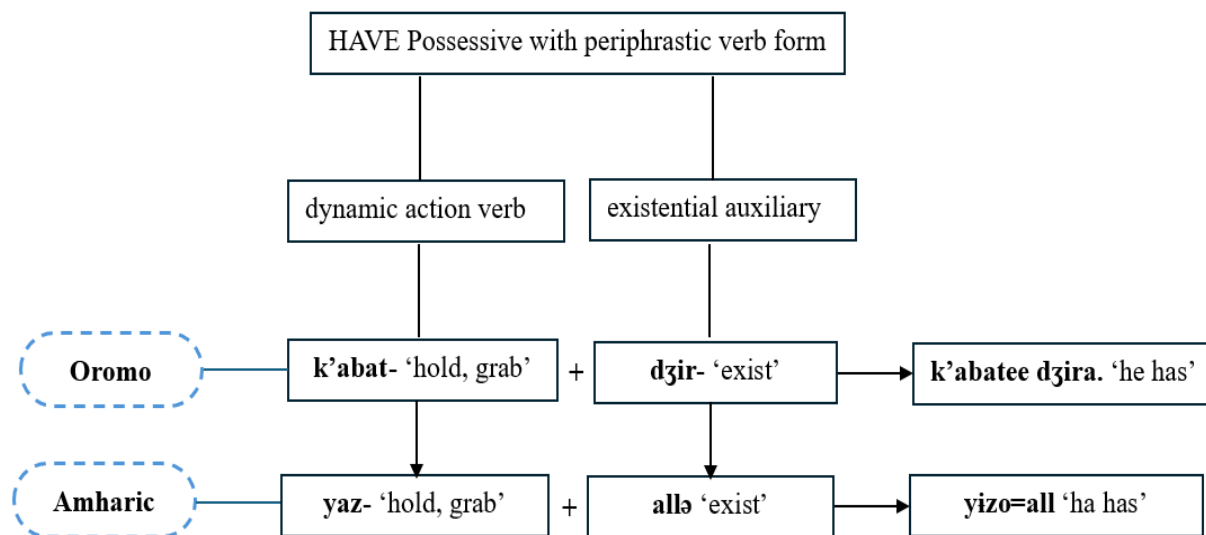


Figure 3: The periphrastic verb forms of possession in Oromo and Amharic

In HAVE-possessive constructions with periphrastic predicates, the main verb appears with a converb marker (e.g., **-ee** in Oromo), while the existential auxiliary functions as a tense or aspect marker. In Oromo, the verb stem **k'ab-** 'hold' requires the middle marker **-at** to convey a possessive meaning, likely indicating the possessor's implicit role as an agent in establishing the possessive relationship. Seiler (1983:83) notes that possessive verbs often incorporate middle markers and/or perfect forms to reflect the possessor's involvement in initiating possession. In Amharic, however, this HAVE-based periphrastic construction does not involve middle marker.

Appleyard (2015:30) points out that the pattern with the converb plus existential auxiliary in Ethiosemitic tense marking comes from Cushitic influence because such

construction tends to be more polysemous in the Agaw languages like Kimant and Xamtanga. The construction involving the existential auxiliary is more frequent and semantically not restricted within its possessive reading in Central Cushitic languages, but it occurs in a limited discourse functions in Oromo as in Amharic.

5.2 Postpositional Periphrasis

In locative constructions, the locative phrase is marked either by oblique case morphology or by an independent adpositional element, while the locatum—often called a pivot (e.g., Bentley et al. 2013)—occurs as the subject and typically occupies the clause-initial position, as in *The book is on the table* (Lyons 1967:390; Clark 1978:87; Koch 2012:536). In contrast, constructions with reversed constituent order and argument status give the locative phrase greater salience than the locatum, as in *There is a book on the table*, which often employs a dummy subject (Clark 1978:87; Koch 2012:580). Such patterns are often treated within the domain of existential constructions. However, Creissels (2019, 2025) identifies them instead as “inverse-locational” constructions, in contrast to what he calls “plain locational” constructions. According to Creissels, the distinction lies in perspectivization, inverse-locational presents the situation from the locative phrase (“ground” in his terminology) to the locatum (“figure” in his terminology), whereas plain locational follows the opposite perspectivization. Creissels (2025:34–39) applies the same distinction to predicative possession, differentiating “Plain possessive” (*I have a book*) from “inverse possessive” (*The book is mine*).

In Oromo and Amharic, existential constructions typically place the locative phrase before the locatum, whereas in locative constructions, a definite locatum occurs clause-initially. It remains unclear whether this order variation results from discourse-based topicalization or from syntactic inversion of the perspectivization. Further study is needed to determine how closely these align with Creissels’ inverse-locational and plain locational dichotomy.

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Web corpus: Tok_2111057/Doc_3173⁶)

(38)	biyya	lafaa irra	nam-ni	akka	isaa-tii	hin
	country	land on	man-NOM	like	3SG.M.GEN-FOC	NEG

⁶ Note that a few examples have been taken from web corpora: <https://tekstlab.uio.no/ethiopia/>.

dʒir-u

exist.PRS-3SG.M.IPFV.NEG

‘In the world, there is no one like him.’

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Web corpus: Tok_679738/Doc_1063)

- (39) idʒoollee-n kiyya **siree irra dʒir-u**⁷
child.PL-NOM 1SG.POSS bed on exist.PRS-3PL.IPFV
‘My children are on the bed.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Web corpus: Toc_89123/Doc_1053)

- (40) **bə-aləm** **lay** bizu aynət yə-bahir zaf ziriyya^w-ottf
INS-world on many kind GEN-Eucalyptus tree species-PL
all-u
exist.NPST-3PL.IPFV

‘In the world, there are many kinds of Eucalyptus tree species.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Web corpus: Toc_309327/Doc_3087)

- (41) lidʒottf-e **alga** **lay** **all-u**
child.PL-1SG.POSS bed on exist.PRS-3PL.IPFV
‘My children are on the bed.’

In (38) and (40), the locative phrases occupy the clause-initial position, though the reverse order is also acceptable in both languages, showing that the locative phrase can occur postlocatum as well. In (39) and (41), the definite locata are the subjects that necessarily occur clause-initially, with the location expressed by the locative phrase assumed to be known by the addressee. Although **siree** ‘bed’ in Oromo and **alga** ‘bed’ in Amharic appear without overt definiteness markers, they can still be part of shared knowledge. Definite alternatives (**sirittfa** in Oromo, **algaw** in Amharic, both meaning ‘the bed’) are also possible in familiar contexts. In general, a broader location tends to co-occur with an indefinite locatum in existential constructions, whereas a precise, identifiable location uses a definite locatum in locative constructions.

The EXIST Possessive with PP-Periphrasis aligns with the existential construction type (cf. 38, 40) in terms of their constituent order and the definiteness properties of its participants. However, unlike existential constructions, the locative phrase in these

⁷ The locative constructions are also possible with an invariant copula **da** and an inflectional copula **nə-** in Amharic instead of the existential verbs.

possessive constructions as an essential element of the construction, because it refers to the possessor participant.

The emerging EXIST Possessive pattern in Oromo involves the verb **dʒir-** ‘exist/there be’ combined with a locative postposition **bira** ‘near/at’. The verb indexes the possessum NP as a subject, and the possessor NP is a LOC-marked OBL participant as in (42&43). Heine et al. (1991: 154) show that the locational pattern “X is at Y’s place” conceptualizes possession in the sense that the thing at Y’s place belongs to Y, and this is among the various PP-Periphrasis conceptualization models including the progressive aspect, intentional aspect and possession.

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Web corpus: or_kamise_a_aau_0801)

- (42) ana **bira** k’arfii hagasana-tu **dʒir-a**
 1SG at money that_much-FOC exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘I have that amount of money.’

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Web corpus: Tok_1203054/Doc_1952)

- (43) ana **bira** furmaat-ni **dʒir-a**
 1SG at solution-NOM exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘I have a solution.’/Lit.: ‘at me there are books.’

The peripheral EXIST Possessive is relatively more frequent in Amharic. It involves the locative postposition **ga** ‘near/at’ combined with the existential verb **allə** ‘exists/there be’. As in Oromo, the possessor is expressed obliquely, while the possessum functions as the grammatical subject.

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; personal knowledge)

- (44) ine **ga** bək’i gənzəb **all-ə**
 1SG at enough money exist.NPST-3SG.M
 ‘I have enough money.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; Leslau 1995:652)

- (45) ine **ga** sira **yəll-ə-mm**
 1SG at job NEG.exist.NPST-3SG.M-NEG
 ‘I have no job.’

Like the periphrastic HAVE Possessive type, the EXIST Possessives in both Oromo and Amharic mainly express ownership and some abstract relations. They are not

acceptable for inalienable possession, such as kinship terms or body-parts, as illustrated in (46) and (47).

Oromo (Afroasitic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (46) a. *ana **bira** mutʃaa-n **dʒir-a**
 1SG at child-NOM exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘I have a child.’
- b. *nam-ittʃa **bira** harkaa = fi miil-ni **dʒir-a**
 1SG-DEF at hand = CONJ leg-NOM exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘The man has hands and legs.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (47) a. *ine **ga** lidʒ **all-ə**
 1SG at baby exist.NPST-3SG.M
 ‘I have a child.’
- b. *səw-yye-w **ga** iddʒ = nna igir **all-ə**
 man-SGTV-DEF at hand = and leg exist.NPST-3SG.M
 ‘The man has hands and legs.’

This periphrastic EXIST Possessive construction has also been attested in Tigre, another Ethiosemitic language. Elias (2014: 72) shows that the preposition **məsəl** ‘at’, when combines with the existential verb **halla** ‘exist/there be’, forms a predicative possession construction aligned with the notion of availability. Note that postpositions are among the features of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (Ferguson 1976:71); however, the north Ethiosemitic languages such as Tigre and Tigrigna are primarily prepositional (Raz 1983:80; Voigt 2012:1162; Elias 2014:131). Accordingly, the PP-Periphrasis in these languages involves a preposition unlike the postpositions commonly found in many other languages of the region.

Tigre (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Elias 2014:72)

- (48) kətābu **məsəl** man **halla?**
 book.3SG.M.POSS at whom exist.NPST.3SG.M
 ‘Who has his book?’

Tigre (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Rainer Voigt, p.c.)

- (49) **məsəl** man kətābu **halla?**
 at whom book.3SG.POSS exist.NPST.3SG.M
 ‘Who has his book?’

The EXIST Possessive pattern comes with a prepositional phrase involving an oblique possessor preceding a possessum subject, as in (48). However, in Tigre, the reverse order is also possible, likely because the language has flexible constituent order (Raz 1983:50). It is common in Ethiosemitic that syntactic arguments often exchange their order except the rigid verb finality. Hence, the possessor can alternatively appear in clause-initial position, as in (49). In broader cross-linguistic perspective, the EXIST Possessive tends to exhibit greater word order flexibility, whereas the HAVE Possessive remains more rigid with possessor precedence. Keidan (2009:350) highlights this distinction, providing examples from Japanese and Korean to illustrate the flexibility of the EXIST Possessive in contrast to the HAVE Possessive.

In the EXIST Possessive with the prepositional phrase, the possessor participant often takes the clause-initial position. This is due to the possessor's prototypically animate and definite properties (Clark 1978:119) or its syntactic topicality (Girma 2003:299). Such possessive constructions with the typical constituent order is also observable in Tigrigna, as shown in (50).

Tigrigna (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; Dagnew Mache Asgede, p.c.)

- (50) a. **ʔab** girmay məś'ihaf **allo**
 at Girmay book exist.NPST.3SG.M
 'Girmay has books.'
- b. məś'ihaf **ʔab** girmay **allo**
 book at Girmay exist.NPST.3SG.M
 'Girmay has books.'

Constituent order variation does not affect the possessive meaning. In (50a), the possessor NP *Girmay* appears clause-initially, likely reflecting a topicalized NP, probably due to its higher salience. In (50b), however, the indefinite NP *məś'ihaf* 'book' occupies the clause-initial position, yet the sentence still conveys temporary possession. These constructions rely on this indefinite NP as the primary contributor to their possessive readings. When this NP becomes definite (e.g., *iti məś'ihaf* 'the book'), the construction conveys a mere location than possession. Furthermore, the indefinite nature of this NP is a key feature shared by existential and possessive constructions. As Clark (1978) demonstrates, existential constructions such as *There is a book on the table* align with possessive constructions like *Tom has a book* in terms of the definiteness and constituent order.

Within the EXIST Possessive type, the OBL possessor can also be marked by the body part term for ‘hand’, which is **harka** in Oromo, and **iddɜ** in Amharic, more specifically in temporary possession expressions. Such possessive constructions have also been attested in some Dravidian languages such as Malayalam and Kannada with the same function to convey temporary possession (Stassen 2009:313). This predicate pattern remains in line with the availability expressions involving intransitive existential verbs, as in (51&52) below.

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (51) boonsaa harka maallak’-ni hedduu-n **dɜir-a**
 Bonsa hand money-NOM much-NOM exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘Bonsa has much money.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; personal knowledge)

- (52) kasa iddɜ bizu gənzəb **all-ə**
 Kasa hand much money exist.NPST-3SG.M
 ‘Kasa has much money.’

The parallel constructions of the EXIST Possessive in Oromo and Amharic illustrate an alternative strategy for encoding possession by incorporating a body part term, specifically the word for ‘hand’. In these examples, **harka** in Oromo and **iddɜ** in Amharic function as intermediaries linking the possessor to the possessed item. This construction type follows a typologically common pattern where body parts metaphorically extend to denote possession of an object at hand. In this case, the possessor comes as an oblique NP, the possessum occurs in the nominative case, and the existential verb conveys the possessive relationship.

Participants	Grammatical Marker	Languages		Meanings
		Oromo	Amharic	
Possessor	ADP	bira	ga	‘near/at’
	HAND	harka	iddɜ	‘at/in hand’
Possessum	Case morphology	-ni, -i, -n, -Ø	ZERO	[NOM case]

Table 5: Constructions with LOC-marked OBL possessor in Oromo and Amharic

The use of ‘hand’ as a grammatical marker of possessive relationship is also observed in various languages worldwide. This phenomenon is particularly common in

possessive-locative alignment systems, where possession is encoded through structures that resemble spatial expressions (Kuteva et al. 2019:221; Rubin 2005:47). The semantic motivation for using ‘hand’ probably stems from the conceptualization of control, grasp, and possession being inherently linked to one’s hands. In addition, these constructions highlight a notable convergence feature of Ethiosemitic and Cushitic languages: the preference for the EXIST Possessive rather than the HAVE Possessive (e.g. “to have” in English). This aligns with broader patterns seen in many African, and Semitic languages, where possession is frequently conceptualized in terms of existence within a specific domain or location.

In the EXIST-based constructions involving PP-Periphrasis, it is challenging to draw a clear grammatical distinction between those used for possessive readings and those encoding locative meaning *sensu stricto*. Crucially, the possessive interpretation is generally inferred from context, where an abstract or metaphorical relationship between the participants involves some notion of control. As Heine (1997:119) observes, locative constructions can yield possessive interpretations, when there is no actual spatial relationship expressed in the discourse context. For instance, although the constructions in (51) for Oromo, and (52) for Amharic may superficially resemble locative patterns, they do not imply that the entity (i.e., ‘money’) is literally located on the ‘hand’ of the participant denoted by the locative phrase. This interpretation arises from contextual cues and grammatical indications, such as the indefiniteness of the subject, and the predominantly topical OBL-LOC participant.

In addition to features such as indefinite subject and the frequent topical OBL-LOC participant, another factor contributing to the possessive interpretation of these constructions is the omission of the locative postposition. Heine (1997:52) notes that locative constructions involving the term ‘hand’ may further grammaticalize into possessive structures precisely through the omission of the locative postposition. This omission appears to occur more readily in contexts where the possessive meaning is intended and is particularly evident in the grammaticalization path of the term ‘hand’ in possessive versus locative constructions in Oromo (53) and Amharic (54).

Oromo (Afroasiatic, Cushitic; personal knowledge)

- (53) a. bilbil-ittfi **hark-kee** **irra** dzir-a
 phone-DEF.M.NOM hand-2SG.POSS on exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘The phone is on your hand.’

- b. dɜara-ttii **harka** meefaa-n waraanaa dɜir-a
 people-DEF.F hand weapon-NOM war.GEN exist-3SG.M.IPFV
 ‘Those individuals have weapons.’

Amharic (Afroasiatic, Ethiosemitic; personal knowledge)

- (54) a. yə-məkina-h k’ulf **iddɜ**-u **lay** all-ə
 GEN-car-2SG.M.POSS key hand-3SG.M.POSS on exist.NPST-3SG.M
 ‘The key of your car is on his hand.’
 b. **bə-wət’t’at-u** **iddɜ** t’əmənja all-ə
 INS-young-DEF.M hand gun exist.NPST-3SG.M
 ‘The young (individuals) have guns.’

In (53a) and (54a), the presence of an overt locative postposition (Oromo: **irra**, Amharic: **lay**) favours a literal locative interpretation, without implying any control or possessive relationship between the participants. In contrast, in (53b) and (54b), the absence of the locative postposition allows for a possessive reading, in which the OBL-LOC participant is construed as having control over or possession of the located entity. Note that, in Amharic (example 54b), the OBL-LOC participant is additionally marked with the instrumental prefix, a marking that is often but not always present in such constructions (cf. example 52).

Overall, the lexical item ‘hand’ functions as a grammatical marker that appears with overt locative postposition when expressing locative meaning and tends to occur without postposition in its possessive use. However, it is important to recognize that this distinction reflects a tendency rather than a strict rule. Some constructions may retain an overt locative postposition even in possessive contexts, depending on discourse factors and contextual interpretations.

6 Convergence in possessive predication in Oromo and Amharic

In alignment to the Oromo-type HAVE Possessive in Cushitic and the Amharic-type EXIST Possessive in Ethiosemitic (cf. § 4), the AUX-Periphrasis and PP-Periphrasis appear alternative constructions, respectively. In other words, the AUX-Periphrasis emerges as an alternative in the HAVE Possessive languages such as Oromo whereas the PP-Periphrasis emerges in the EXIST Possessive languages such as Amharic. However, these periphrastic constructions are synchronically found in both Oromo and Amharic languages, functioning as supplementary constructions.

Languages	Predicate	Pattern	Examples	Meaning
Oromo	HAVE	Plain	<i>k'aba</i>	'He has.'
	HAVE	AUX-Periphrasis	<i>k'abeera</i>	'He has held.' > 'He has.'
	EXIST	PP-Periphrasis	<i>isa bira dzira</i>	'Near him exists.' > 'He has.'
Amharic	EXIST	Plain	<i>allaw</i>	'He has.'
	HAVE	AUX-Periphrasis	<i>yizoall</i>	'He has held' > 'He has'
	EXIST	PP-Periphrasis	<i>issu ga allə</i>	'Near him exists.' > 'He has'

Table 6: Plain and periphrastic patterns of possessive predication in Oromo and Amharic

As shown in Table 4, both Oromo and Amharic display three possessive construction types. Oromo uses the language-specific HAVE Possessive with plain verb forms, alongside two shared constructions: the HAVE Possessive with AUX-Periphrasis and the EXIST Possessive with PP-Periphrasis. Amharic, in contrast, uniquely employs an EXIST Possessive with plain verb forms, while sharing the same two periphrastic patterns. In short, each of the languages has one distinct construction type, while the remaining two are to both.

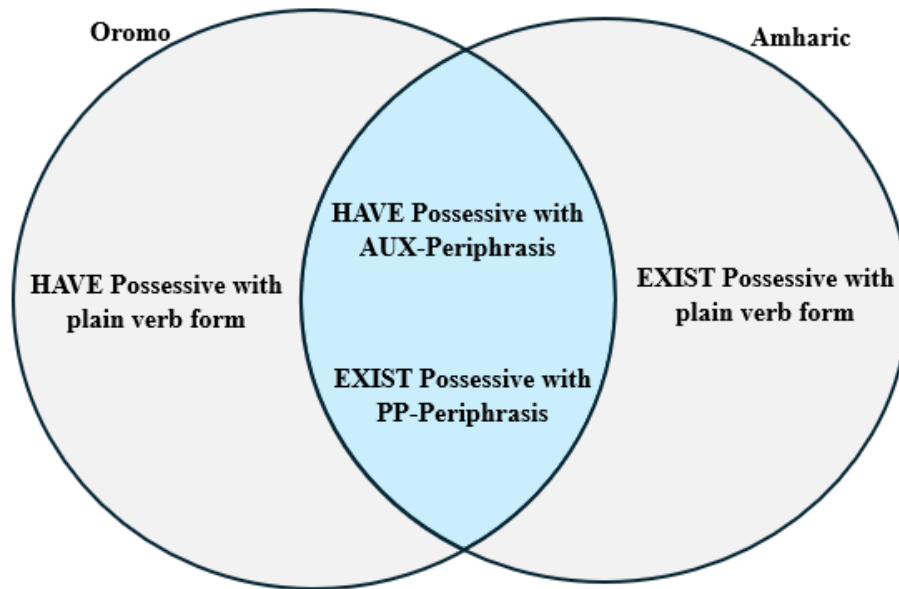


Figure 4: Shared possessive constructions in Oromo and Amharic

Therefore, Oromo employs two construction types within the HAVE Possessive and one in the EXIST Possessive, whereas Amharic utilizes one construction type in the

HAVE Possessive and two in the EXIST Possessive. The distinct possessive predication strategies in each of these languages reflect their genetic and historical differences, while the parallel constructions likely result from prolonged language contact (i.e., more than five centuries). These shared construction types are pragmatically motivated, primarily serving to express temporary possession.

7 Conclusion

Certain possessive constructions in Oromo and Amharic illustrate a shared HAVE Possessive type, characterized by a periphrastic verb form. This combines the converb forms of the transitive action verbs **k’abat-** in Oromo and **yaz-** in Amharic—meaning ‘hold, seize, carry,’ etc.—with auxiliary periphrases that function as tense/aspect markers. In such constructions, the possessor appears as NOM in both Oromo and Amharic, while the possessum appears in absolute (citation) form in Oromo and ACC in Amharic. Additionally, both languages employ an EXIST Possessive type, where possession is expressed through an existential verb, with the possessor marked as OBL-LOC and the possessum as NOM. These constructions incorporate postpositional elements as PP-Periphrases to mark possession. Furthermore, the grammaticalization of the body part noun for ‘hand’ (**harka** in Oromo, **idd3** in Amharic) as markers of possessive relations reinforces the metaphorical link between possession and physical grasp in these languages. These patterns highlight a deep syntactic and semantic connection between the two languages, underscoring their shared linguistic strategies for expressing possession.

The HAVE Possessive with AUX-Periphrasis likely originated in Oromo and was later borrowed into Amharic. Conversely, Amharic is characterized by the EXIST Possessive, suggesting that the more recent PP-Periphrasis originated in Amharic and was subsequently borrowed into Oromo. Thus, the parallel periphrastic possessive constructions in Oromo and Amharic result from language contact rather than genetic inheritance or independent innovation. It is plausible that the AUX-Periphrasis in Amharic reflects Oromo or Cushitic influence, while the PP-Periphrasis in Oromo reflects Amharic or Ethiosemitic influence.

The convergence between Oromo and Amharic in their AUX-Periphrasis and PP-Periphrasis is a recent grammaticalization process, while their default predicative possession constructions remain distinct. Language contact has yet to alter their core typological distinction: Oromo retains HAVE Possessive, whereas Amharic follows

EXIST Possessive. This persistence is likely due to their relatively recent interaction compared to the long history of linguistic contact in Ethiopia. While Ethiopia has experienced over two millennia of language contact situation, in terms of Cushitic-Ethiosemitic interaction, the particularly intensive interaction between Oromo and Amharic dates back approximately five centuries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT REMOVED FOR ANONYMIZATION

Abbreviation

1	first person	FUT	future	OBL	oblique
2	second person	GEN	genitive	P	plural gender
3	third person	INS	instrumental	PFV	perfective
ACC	accusative	IPFV	imperfective	PL	plural
ASSO	associative	LOC	locative	POSS	possessive
AUX	auxiliary	M	masculine	PRS	present tense
CONJ	conjunction	MID	middle	PST	past
CVB	converb	NC	North Cushitic	SBJ	subject
DAT	dative	NEG	negative	SG	singular
DEF	definite	NOM	Nominative	SGTV	singulative
F	feminine	NPST	non-past	TOP	topic
FOC	focus	OBJ	object	VN	verbal noun

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