The Structure of a Noun Phrase in Ezha, Ethio-Semitic

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Abstract: This article is meant to provide a descriptive account of a noun phrase in the Ezha language. By so doing, no particular theoretical assumption is adhered to; the data analysis is dictated by a purely descriptive perspective. Data for the study were accessed by consulting native speakers through elicitation augmented by recording of spontaneous speech. A noun phrase in Ezha is found out to be built out of a head noun alone or a head noun together with (a) dependent(s). In situations where a noun phrase is made up of a head noun along with dependents, the dependents can be a noun, an adjective, a numeral, a demonstrative and/or a relative clause. The phrase is always head-final.

Keywords: noun phrase, Ezha, head, dependent, modifier, complement

1. Introduction

Ezha is one of the different Gurage languages, Ethio-Semitic, spoken typically in and around the town of Agenna, Ethiopia. It is spoken by people of whom the majority is Orthodox Christians, some Muslims, and very few Protestants. Most of the Ezha people are farmers residing in the rural area by cultivating *Enset* 'false banana', while most of those who live in the urban areas are merchants. The area where Ezha is spoken is surrounded to the north-east by Muher, to the south-west by Chaha and to the east by Gumer as depicted by the following figure.

This particular paper deals with the structure of a noun phrase in Ezha from a purely descriptive point of view. The data for the study were collected through elicitation supplemented by recording of free narratives by consulting native speakers of the language.

2. Discussion

A noun phrase in Ezha can be formed out of a head noun alone or along with other lexical and grammatical items serving as dependents to the head noun. This phrasal category is always right-headed, hence, no dependent constituent can occur following the head noun. The head is the only obligatory constituent, while the dependents are optional

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elements which could be either modifiers or complements to the head if they exist.

The head noun within a noun phrase can select another noun (phrase) as a dependent constituent. The dependent noun (phrase) assumes different roles as shown below.

- (1) a. [arsitt buk'rə] sijə-ttʃ-im
female mule buy.PFV-3FS-CM
'She bought a female mule.'
- b. təbatt imar tʃənnəwom
[təbatt imar] tʃənnə-o-m
male donkey come.PFV-3MPL-CM
'Male donkeys came.'
- c. tɪkə əriddʒ jədjawota bənnam
[tɪkə əriddʒ] jədjə-ota bənnə-ə-m
child boy lunch-3MS.POSS eat.PFV-3MS-CM
'A little boy ate his lunch.'
- d. [əttʃə sank'a] sijə-ttʃ-im
wood door buy.PFV-3FS-CM
'She bought a wooden door.'

Figure 1. Geographical location of Ezha and surrounding languages

In the examples 1a-1c, the dependent constituents serve as modifiers of the head noun. The dependent constituent in 1d, on the other hand, is a complement to the head. This goes in line with Baye (2008) who stipulates that a dependent noun (phrase) accompanying the head of a matrix noun phrase serves as a complement if it denotes the material which the entity referred to by the head noun is made of. Following Baye, dependents like *əttf'ə* 'wood' in *əttf'ə sank'a* 'a wooden door' are analyzed to be complements to their heads.

A head noun can also be accompanied by possessor nouns. In this case, the possessor noun attaches the genitive prefix *jə-*, and precedes the possessed head noun as in the following examples.

- (2) a. *jəʒəbb tʃ'ira gef^w*
 [jə-ʒəbb tʃ'ira] gef-u
 GEN-lion mane long-COP.PRES.3MS
 'A lion's mane is long.'
- b. *jə-dəsta əridɖ təmariju*
 [jə-dəsta əridɖ] təmari-u
 GEN-Desta boy student-COP.PRES.3MS
 'Desta's son is a student.'
- c. *[jə-xut t'aj] m^wət-ə-m*
 GEN-he sheep die.PFV-3MS-CM
 'His sheep died.'
- d. *jabota əraj m^wətom*
 [jə-ab-ota əraj] m^wət-o-m
 GEN-father-3MS.POSS cow.PL die.PFV-3MPL-CM
 'His father's cows died.'

The examples depict that the genitive prefix can attach to both nouns and personal pronouns in order to express a possessor-possessed relationship between the dependent and the head constituents within a noun phrase. The head noun in 2c can have either a singular or plural reading since it is not specified for number, the distinction is made by considering the subject agreement suffixes attached to a verb in sentential constructions as in ex.3 below whereby the 3MS subject suffix *-ə* and the 3MPL subject suffix *-o* are attached to the verb indicating the singularity and plurality of the entities referred to by the head noun within the subject noun phrase.

In the example 2d, there exists the notion of double possession. The utterance *ab-ota* 'his father' on its own indicates possession in the sense that *ab* 'father' is possessed by a third person singular masculine entity. When this noun phrase is marked by the genitive prefix and combined with the noun *əraj* 'cows' to form the matrix phrase *jabota əraj* 'my father's cows', another possessive reading is introduced; this notion of possession indicates that the

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entities signaled by *əraj* ‘cows’ are possessed by *abota* ‘his father’.

- (3) a. *jijja* *t’aj* *trama* *m^wətəm*
 jə-ijja *t’aj* *trama* *m^wət-ə-m*
 GEN-I sheep yesterday die.PFV-3MS-CM
 ‘A sheep of mine died yesterday.’
- b. *jijja* *t’aj* *trama* *m^wətom*
 jə-ijja *t’aj* *trama* *m^wət-o-m*
 GEN-I sheep yesterday die.PFV-3MPL-CM
 ‘My sheep(PL) died yesterday.’

In some phrasal constructions, the genitive morpheme can attach to the dependent nouns without rendering any sense of possession as in the following examples.

- (4) a. *jagənnə* *gred* *mərkammamərkammarəma*
 [*jə-agənnə* *gred*] *mərkamma~mərkamma-r-əma*
 GEN-Agenna girls beautiful~PL-COP.PRES-3FPL
 ‘Girls of Agenna are beautiful.’
- b. *jabar* *tʃ^wet* *jittakkəs*
 [*jə-abar* *tʃ^wet*] *ji-ttakkəs*
 GEN-sunny_season sun 3MS-burn:REC.IPFV
 ‘The Sun of the summer season burns.’
- c. [*jə-məsk’ər* *kitf^wə*] *bənnə-x^w-m*
 GEN-Holy_Cross tatar eat.PFV-1S-CM
 ‘I ate tatar of the Holy Cross holiday.’

The phrasal structures in ex.4 are formally analogous to those in ex.2 by virtue of having the genitive prefix attached to the dependent constituents. However, none of them expresses the notion of possession. In example 4a, the dependent noun designates the origin of the entity denoted by the head noun. In the examples 4b & 4c, on the other hand, the dependent constituents are meant to specify the entities referred to by the head nouns in terms of period of time or season when they are localized.

In situations where a definite head noun is preceded by dependent nouns, the definite morpheme attaches to the dependents and not to the head, neither does it to both at the same time as exemplified below.

- (5) a. [*arsitt-iwe* *buk’rə*] *sijə-ttʃ-in-m*
 female-DEF mule buy.PFV-3FSSj-3MSOj-CM
 ‘She bought the female mule.’
- b. *tikəwe* *gərəd* *tadotəxita*gi *wərəttʃim*
 [*tikə-we* *gərəd*] *tə-adot-əxita-gi* *wər-əttʃ-m*
 child-DEF girl COM-mother-3FS.POSS-COM go.PFV-3FS-CM

‘The little girl went with her mother.’

If a definite head noun is modified by a personal pronoun or a proper noun possessor, the definite morpheme need not have to occur. This adheres to the general rule that proper names and personal pronouns are inherently definite so that they do not need a definite marker, the definite reading of the head noun is signaled by the possessor pronouns and proper nouns themselves.

- (6) a. [jə-dəsta məs’af] tə-gəddəd-ə-m
 GEN-Desta book PASS-tear.PFV-3MS-CM
 ‘Desta’s book is torn.’
 b. [jə-hit t’aj] m^wət-ə-m
 GEN-she sheep die.PFV-3MS-CM
 ‘Her sheep died.’

The head of a noun phrase can also select an adjective as its dependent. Such a dependent always precedes the head and serves as a modifier as demonstrated by the following examples.

- (7) a. [gəmbənnə bora] sijə-tt[-im
 black ox buy.PFV-3FS-CM
 ‘She bought a black ox.’
 b. [gef atankirt] ant’-ə-m
 tall plant cut.PFV-3MS-CM
 ‘He cut a tall tree.’

Ezha adjectives indicate plurality morphologically by complete reduplication. Hence, when the head of a noun phrase has a plural reading, the dependent adjective assumes its reduplicated form in order to agree with the number of the head noun.

- (8) a. at[ʔirətʔir səb tʃənnəwom
 [atʔir~atʔir səb] tʃənnə-o-m
 short~PL man come.PFV-3MPL-CM
 ‘Short men came.’
 b. mərkammamərkamma gred] tʃənnəmam
 [mərkamma~mərkamma gred] tʃənnə-əma-m
 beautiful~PL girl.PL come.PFV-3FPL-CM
 ‘Beautiful girls came.’
 c. * mərkamma gred tʃənnəmam
 [mərkamma gred] tʃənnə-əma-m
 beautiful girl.PL come.PFV-3FPL-CM
 ‘Beautiful girls came.’

In example 8a, the head noun *səb* ‘man’ could have both singular and plural readings. As

such, when this noun is meant to render a singular reading, the preceding adjective must appear in its non-reduplicated form, whereas in situations where the head noun is meant to refer to plural entities, the adjective assumes its reduplicated form. The head of the phrasal construction in 8b, on the other hand, surfaces in its plural form; its singular counterpart is *gərəd*. Thus, it is only the reduplicated form of the adjective that can occupy the preceding slot within the noun phrase headed by this noun. The occurrence of the non-reduplicated adjective preceding the plural head noun results in an ill-formed construction as in 8c.

Two or more adjectives can also co-occur as modifiers of a head noun. In such a situation, the order of adjectives is not fixed; they can freely exchange positions with equal level of grammaticality.

- (9) a. [gef ejnət'ərək' fīwwət gərəd] tʃənnə-tʃ-im
tall shameless skinny girl come.PFV-3FS-CM
'A tall shameless skinny girl came.'
- b. [ejnət'ərək' gef fīwwət gərəd] tʃənnə-tʃ-im
shameless tall skinny girl come.PFV-3FS-CM
'A shameless tall skinny girl came.'
- c. [fīwwət ejnət'ərək' gef gərəd] tʃənnə-tʃ-im
skinny shameless tall girl come.PFV-3FS-CM
'A skinny shameless tall girl came.'

Adjectives attract the definite article when they occur in a definite noun phrase. When a series of adjectives co-occur within the same noun phrase headed by a definite noun, the definite marker attaches to the left-most modifying adjective.

- (10) a. [gefgefwe gred] tʃənnəməm
gef~gef-we gred tʃənnə-əma-m
tall~PL-DEF girl.PL come.PFV-3FPL-CM
'The tall girls came.'
- b. [atʃ'ir-we ejnət'ərək' gərəd] tʃənnə-tʃ-im
short-DEF shameless girl come.PFV-3FS-CM
'The short shameless girl came.'

Like adjectives, numerals can modify a head noun. If a numeral precedes a definite head noun, the definite marker is suffixed to the numeral and not to the head noun as in ex.11.

- (11) a. [arbətt t'aj] sijə-x^w-m
four sheep buy.PFV-1S-CM
'I bought four sheep.'
- b. x^wettīwe gred tʃənnəməm
[x^wett-we gred] tʃənnə-əməm
two-DEF girl.PL come.PFV-3FPL-CM

‘The two girls came.’

Numerals can also be combined with nouns to form measure phrases and classifier phrases, which in turn serve as modifiers of a head noun. Measure phrases in Ezha have nominal heads and signify units of measurement. They express precise amounts of entities designated by countable and mass nouns. Classifier phrases, on the other hand, do not use measurement or container terms. Though they are structurally analogous to measure phrases, classifier phrases are used to individualize an entity out of a universe category. The examples 12a & 12b below illustrate how measure phrases modify nouns, while examples 12c & 12d indicate noun phrases involving classifier phrases.

- (12) a. [att t'ək'wja dinnittfa] zənnəf-ə-m
 one basket potato loot.PFV-3MS-CM
 ‘He looted a basket of potato.’
 b. [x^wet wəfər ixa] gədda-ttj-im
 two pot water fetch.PFV-3FS-CM
 ‘She fetched two pots of water.’
 c. [att godʒə k'awa] nə-r-ə-n
 one hole coffee exist-3MSSj-3MSOj
 ‘He has a single plant of coffee.’
 d. [att əttj'ə bəkk'ollo] sijə-ttj-im
 one wood maize buy.PFV-3FS-CM
 ‘She bought a single bunch of maize.’

The other modifiers in a noun phrase are demonstratives. Both the proximal and distal demonstratives modify a head noun thereby specifying the object referred to by the head noun in terms of distance relative to the speaker and/or the hearer during a certain discourse. The demonstratives can precede singular and plural nouns as there is no number distinction on demonstratives; only very rarely speakers of the language introduce the associative plural morpheme *nə-* so as to express plurality.

- (13) a. [zix/zax bet] jə-xut-u
 this/that house GEN-he-COP.PRES.3MS
 ‘This/that house is his.’
 b. [zix/zax deng¹a] ʒəbb k'ətt'ər-o-m
 these/those boy.PL lion kill.PFV-3MPL-CM
 ‘These/those boys killed a lion.’

The definite marker *-we* never appears when demonstratives are used as modifiers of a definite head noun. The head noun along with the modifying demonstrative renders a definite reading without the occurrence of any definite marker. Thus, the nominal phrases indicated in ex.13 are specified for definiteness through the inherent definite nature of the

demonstratives.

A nominal head can also be modified by a relative clause which always precedes the head noun it modifies. Within the relative clause, the relative verb along with the relativizer prefix occurs as a final constituent of the clause.

- (14) a. [s'əxaj jə-sijə-ttʃ-in mäs'af] bək'ir gəss' nəɾ-ə-n
Tsehay REL-buy.PFV-3FSSj-3MSOj hundred page exist-3MSSj-3MSO
'The book that Tsehay bought has hundred pages.'
- b. [jə-dəsta jə-k'ənnəm-o-j deng¹a] wəlk'itt'e-nijə wor-o-m
ACC-Desta REL-insult.PFV-3MPLSj-3MSOj boy.PL Wolkite-GOAL go.PFV-3MPL-CM
'The boys who insulted Desta went to Wolkite.'

The relative verb shows concord with the relativized noun. Note that the 3MSO suffix surfaces as *-n* in the example 14a, whereas it occurs as *-j* in the example 14b due to the variation in the subject.

The different dependents addressed so far can co-occur with a single head noun. In such a case, the basic constituent order is Demonstrative-Relative clause- Numeral- Adjective- (possessor) Noun-Head Noun. There is, however, a considerable degree of flexibility for the dependents to exchange their positions. For instance, the numeral can follow the adjective, and the possessor noun can precede the numeral and the adjective. The relative clause can be situated everywhere except that it cannot follow the possessor noun modifier. If there is a noun serving as a complement of the head noun, it always occurs immediately before the head. The demonstrative either follows the relative clause within the basic constituent sequence or assumes the initial position of the phrase. The following data present some possible co-occurrences of the different dependent constituents preceding a head noun.

- (15) a. [zix x^wet nik^jə~nik^jə jə-dəsta birət dist'] tə-səbbər-o-m
this two big~PL GEN-Desta metal pan PASS-break.PFV-3MPL-CM
'These two big metal pans of Desta got broken down.'
- b. [zix nik^jə~nik^jə x^wet jə-dəsta birət dist'] tə-səbbər-o-m
This big~PL two GEN-Desta metal pan PASS-break.PFV-3MPL-CM
'These two big metal pans of Desta got broken down.'
- c. [zix jə-dəsta x^wet nik^jə~nik^jə birət dist'] tə-səbbər-o-m
this GEN-Desta two big~PL metal pan PASS-break.PFV-3MPL-CM
'These two big metal pans of Desta got broken down.'
- d. [zax s'əxaj jə-sijə-ttʃ-ino x^wet biʃʃa~biʃʃa jə-wəlk'itt'e t'aj]
that Tsehay REL-buy.PFV-3FSSj-3MPLOj two red~PL GEN-Wolkite sheep
m^wət-o-m
die.PFV-3MPL- CM

‘Those two big sheep of Wolkite which Tsehay bought died.’

- e. [s’əxaj jə-sijə-tf-ino zax x^wet biʃfa~biʃfa jə-wəlk’itt’e t’aj]
 Tsehay REL-buy.PFV-3FSSj-3MPLOj that two red~PL GEN-Wolkite sheep
 m^wət-o-m
 die.PFV-3MPL-CM

‘Those two big sheep of Wolkite which Tsehay bought died.’

- f. [zax x^wet biʃfa~biʃfa s’əxaj jə-sijə-tf-ino jə-wəlk’itt’e t’aj]
 that two red.PL Tsehay REL-buy.PFV-3FSSj-3MPLOj GEN-Wolkite sheep
 m^wət-o-m
 die. PFV-3MPL-CM

‘Those two big sheep of Wolkite which Tsehay bought died.’

3.Conclusion

A noun phrase in Ezha can be constructed out of a head noun alone or the head together with dependents. If dependents occur within a noun phrase, they could be nouns, adjectives, numerals, demonstratives and/or relative clauses. All dependents modify the head noun restrictively, they are meant to restrict the potential reference of the modified noun in some way. For example, in the phrases *gəmbənnə zəbb* ‘a black lion’ and *zix t’aj* ‘this/these sheep’, the adjective *gəmbənnə* ‘black’ and the demonstrative *zix* ‘this/these’ restrictively modify the nouns *zəbb* ‘lion’ and *t’aj* ‘sheep’ respectively.

If the head nouns were to occur alone, they could potentially refer to any types of entities. The modifiers restrict the references of the phrases to just a lion that is black and a/those sheep that is/are currently addressed by the speaker. In situations where multiple modifiers co-occur with a head noun, each of them poses its effect in restricting the potential reference of the modified noun. The result of piling up modifiers is that the actual referent of the phrase must satisfy all of them for each modifier acts as a criterion that the ultimate referent(s) of the phrase must satisfy.

It is also worth noting that none of the modifiers are required or implied by the head nouns they modify. The phrases would be grammatically complete without the modifiers though adding or removing modifiers affects the potential referential scope of the modified elements, hence, the possibility of having a noun phrase constructed out of a head noun alone.

Symbols and abbreviations

1, 2, 3	First, second and third person
CM	Clause Marker
COM	Comitative

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COP	Copula
DEF	Definite
F	Feminine
GEN	Genitive
M	Masculine
Oj	Object
PASS	Passive
PFV	Perfective
PL	Plural
POSS	Possessive
PRES	Present
REC	Reciprocal
REL	Relativiser
S	Singular
Sj	Subject

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