

Negation is **discontinuous not** in Amharic

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May 21, 2022

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Abstract

Keywords

Amharic; negation; negative polarity items; discontinuous morphology, nonconcatenative

1 Introduction

Basic syntactic operations in the Minimalist program are designed to be highly simple. The core syntactic operation such as Merge, for example, is assumed to combine only two syntactic units at a time. All and every syntactic constructions are assumed to drive from this basic binary Merge.

But, natural language doesn't appear to be as simple as that. One of the cases where the binary merge appears to face a challenge is the case of nonconcatenative morphology. Given morphemes are one type of syntactic objects that are supposed to merge with the host lexical items or other morphemes, the nonconcatenative patterns don't behave like regular binary units.

Discontinuous morphology is one of those nonconcatenative morphological patterns that would pose a challenge to the binary merge. The negation in Amharic is marked by apparently discontinuous morphemes which encircle the lexical verb which it modifies. Consider the following example from [Demeke \(2003\)](#).

- (1) yonas ?al-hed-ə-m
Jona neg-go-3msgS-neg
 'Jonas didn't go.'

Here, the clause is negated with the help of two non-linear, nonconcatenative morphemes which appear in the pre- and post verbal positions. In some works, these two units are considered two different part of the same negation feature. Others consider their relationship to be a sort of agreement (concord). Demeke for example treats these units as negative concord.

In this paper, I am going to present a supporting evidence to the linguistic proposals that claim that the basic syntactic system doesn't contain non-binary units. The seemingly nonconcatenative morphologies emerge as epiphenomena to some post-syntactic (PF) modifications to the syntactic units [Bye & Svenonius \(2012\)](#). I will specifically argue that the negation in Amharic is not really represented by a discontinuous morphology. What looks like a discontinues negation system is actually a layer of functional items where one of them is a finiteness feature selecting the negation feature. The *-m* item which appears with the negation *a-* is actually not a negative item. It is rather part a finiteness marker which happens to have a correlation with the negation because of the selection relation to it.

2 The Negation as discontinuous morpheme

Various authors have noted that the negation in Amharic is signaled by by two pieces of morphemes which appear in the preverbal and post verbal positions.

([Leyew 1998](#): 221), for example, stated that "Amharic has discontinuous morphemes which represent negation and tense, whereas English verbs have an independent morpheme for negation and a continuous morpheme for tense."

([Leslau 1995](#): 824-5) also made similar statements. "The negative perfect is expressed by *al-* prefixed to the affirmative perfect followed by the suffixed *-m*... The negative imperfect is expressed by *a-* prefixed to the affirmative imperfect followed by the suffixed *-m*"

(Little 1974: 91) is another work which claimed “Amharic negative constructions are discontinuous, consisting of a prefix *al-* and suffix *-m*.”

From recent publications, it is Demeke 2003 who confirmed the presence of complex morphology for the negation of Amharic. In his discussion of the Semitic languages of Ethiopia, he grouped Amharic with those languages which mark negation using discontinuous morphemes.

While this appears to be the standard view, there is at least one work which considers the *-m* component not as part of the negation. Without much explicitly discussion why turn out to be the case, Assefa (2018) simply considers the *-m* item to be a clause marker rather than as part of the negation system. I fully agree with the idea that the *m* particle not to be part of the negation.

3 The post-verbal *-m* is not part of the negation

In this section, I am going to argue that the post-verbal element *-m* is not part of the negation. As I have noted above, the *-m* morpheme is assumed to be part of the negation. One of the main reason for such an assumption is the strict association of the morpheme with the negation prefix. It is assumed to be available only on negative clauses.

Here, I will indeed show that this is not the case. The *-m* morpheme is neither always correlated to the negation, nor is the negation associated with the *-m* morpheme. They are associated on a certain types of clause; but they are also mutual exclusive in other types of clauses.

3.1 The post-verbal has restricted distribution

The first reason to assume the *-m* particle not to be as part of the negation system is its restricted distribution. That is, the negation item appears with the *-m* particle only within restricted syntactic contexts. The post-verbal item, for example, never appears when the verbs are in jussive form.

- (2) *inč’ət-u-n ?a-yi-sbər-ə-w*
wood-def-acc neg-3msg-break-3msgS-3msgO
 ‘Let him not break the wood.’

In addition to the jussive form of the verbs, the post-verbal part of the negation never shows up in complement clauses.

This has already been noted in previous studies. (Little 1974: 91) for example noted that the prefix is the sole marker of negation in subordinate clauses: “...the prefix is obligatory in all instances and is the only indication of negation in subordinate verb forms.”

Consider the following examples.

- (3) yosef-n kə-ʔal-t'ərɾa-čč-w-(*m) ...
Josef-acc if-neg-call-3fsgS-3msgO
 'If she didn't call Josef...'
- (4) Mariam ʔndə-ʔal-hed-əčč-(-*m¹) ak'allə-hu
Mary CM-neg-went-3fsgS know-1sg
 'I know that Mary didn't go.'
- (5) wədə kifl yə-ʔal-gəbba-w-(*m) təmari...
to class rel-neg-enter student
 'The student who didn't enter to class...'

In the first example, the negation of the conditional clause contains no post-verbal element of the negation. In the second example, we have a finite complement clause embedded under the complementizer *ʔndə*. Here again, the negation of the embedded clause lacks the post-verbal part of the negation. The same is true with the relative clause given in (5).

These examples shows that the post verbal *-m* suffix appears in a restricted environments. The prefix negative morph is the sole unit that encodes negation.

3.2 Negative polarity items

The negation polarity items in Amharic are made by attaching the *-m* particle on indefinite *wh*-items. These items are sometimes considered to carry a negative sense. But, that is absolutely further from the truth. They never carry negation meaning.

Table 1: Generation of negative polarity items

wh-item	derived	English equivalent
man ('who')	man-m	anybody
mɪn ('what')	mɪn-m	whatever
ləmin ('why')	ləmin-m	for whatever
yət ('where')	yət-m	anywhere
məččə ('when')	məččəm	anytime
ʔndət ('how')	ʔndət-m	any how

¹ The *-m* particle I am discussing here should not be confused with the one which is used to mark focus. The relation of the two items is beyond the scope of the current paper. But, it is important to note that in the sense of focus, the *-m* item is licit in these examples.

Girma Demeke translates them English negative equivalents such as *nobody*, *nowhere*, *notime* etc. But, the reason does that is because he is putting them under negative clause. The right equivalents are the positive NPI items because they can be used in positive clauses, and the meaning remain positive.

- (6) Man-m ?a-y-wədd-at-m
Who-CM neg-3msgS-like-3fsgO-CM
 ‘Nobody likes her.’

By looking at the meaning of *nobody* here, Girma considers the *man-m* as equivalent to *nobody*. But, that is just wrong. The *nobody* sense came from the negative item that is attached on the verb. The right word by word translation of the sentence should be: *Anybody does not like her* which is equivalent to *Nobody likes her*.

The combination of the *-m* and the *wh*-items doesn’t produce the counterparts of *nobody*; rather that of *anybody*. This becomes evidence when we put the combination with the positive clause.

- (7) Yemənist-n nibrət man-m nəw ye-mi-zərf-ə-w
government-acc resource who-CM is rel-inf-rob-3msgS-3msgO
 ‘Everyone robs government’s resources.’
 #‘Nobody robs government’s resources.’

- (8) Esu yət-m bihon mənor yi-ččil-all
He where-CM be live 3msgS-can-aux
 ‘He can live anywhere.’
 #‘He can live nowhere.’

- (9) Məččə-m bi-hed ti-k’əbbəl-əñ-all-əčč
When-CM if-go 3fsgS-accept-1sgO-aux-3fsgS
 ‘She will accept me wherever I go.’

In the above sentences, we don’t have the actual negative marker prefix. That makes the sentence positive. And as a result, the seemingly negative sense associated with the *-m* is not available. This shows that the combination of the *m* particle and the *wh*-item doesn’t produce negative pronominal. This is a conclusive evidence that the *m* particle has no capabilities to negate the constituents it attaches on.

If the post-verbal item is not a negative marker, what is it then? In the following subsections, we are going to entertain different possible avenues of understanding it.

4 The identify of the post-verbal item

In the following subsections, we are going to investigate possible grammatical characterizations which could capture the post verbal item.

4.1 As an expletive negation

“The term EXPLETIVE NEGATION refers to a Neg syntactic constituent which appears in certain syntactic environments but makes no effective contribution to the Interpretation of the whole string containing this constituent.” [Espinal \(1992\)](#).

Some languages have as system known as expletive negation where a normally negating element appears to lack its negating capacity in some contexts. This is a phenomena widely attested in Romance languages.

Look at a typical example of expletive negation from Italian:

- (10) Resto *finché (non)* arriva qualcuno.
stay.1sg until not arrives somebody
 ‘I’ll stay until somebody arrives.’ [Espinal \(2000\)](#)

Here, the *non* items is the regular negator morpheme. But, under restricted structural contexts, when it appears with certain verb classes for example, it loses its negating meaning and fails to affect the truth condition of the clause. This is what is known as the expletive negation.

But, as we have seen above, the situation with Amharic *m* particle is different because it is completely devoid of negative interpretation. It simply occurs with the negative marker; but never negates a clause by its own. For that I it cannot be considered as an expletive negation.

4.2 Negative concord

Demeke at some point equated the dual negative items in Amharic as a negative concord, when he states: “As mentioned above clausal negation in Amharic, Endegeñ, Ennemor, Tigrinya and some other languages is a case of negative concord, where two negative morphemes appear in a single clause”.

It is therefore important to investigate if the occurrence of the post verbal item with the pre verbal negative could be considered as a negative concord.

The negation concord is also quite similar phenomena to the expletive negation. In negative concord, multiple negative marking items are used with the semantic impact which is equivalent to a single negative marker.

”Multiple negative constituents in a clause contribute only one instance of negation to the interpretation.” [Penka \(2011\)](#)

(11) I didn’t eat no meat = I didn’t eat meat

(12) Ja nikogo ne vizu
I n-person neg see
 ‘I didn’t see anyone.’
 ‘*I saw someone.’

Russian, from [Penka \(2011\)](#)

The phenomena again doesn’t fit with the *-m* morpheme because this morpheme is never a negative marker. It is well recognized that the *not* and *no* items we have above are genuine negative morphemes. The only reason why this is negation concord is because the meaning of one of them becomes vacuous when it appears with another negator item. But, for Amharic, that is not the case. As we have seen, the *-m* item never functions to mark negation by its own. As such, we cannot consider its presence as an instance of negation concord.

4.3 Bipartite Negation

Some languages are known to have bipartite negation system where two negation marking units appear in a clause [Tillesson \(2019\)](#).

The following sentences are from Ewe:

(13) Kofi mé- ðu nú o
Kofi neg₁- eat thing neg₂
 ‘Kofi didn’t eat.’
[Collins et al. \(2015\)](#)

Here are French, Afrikaans, Sgaw Karen examples from [Tillesson \(2019\)](#), respectively:

(14) Marie (**ne**) mange **pas**.
Marie NEG eats NEG
 ‘Marie doesn’t eat.’

(15) Hy kom nie in (nie).
he come NEG in NEG
 ‘He doesn’t come in/He isn’t coming in.’

(16) jə1 tə1 nə2 pi2 (bə5)
I neg understand NEG
 ‘I don’t understand.’

One of the negation elements precedes the verb while the other ones follows it. The system here looks similar to the two items in Amharic.

These similarities might lead one to think that the situation the same with Amharic, and conclude that the case of Amharic is a case of bipartite negation. Again, I don't think this conclusion is warranted for one the reason I already explained above– the NEG₂ of Amharic is never a genuine negative marker. For that, I still consider the Amharic negation relation cannot be considered as bipartite negation.

4.4 *-m* as negative polarity item

Finally, I am going to present what I think is the most attractive characterization of the *-m* particle—that is the NPI.

Thus far, we have seen that the morpheme never marks negation by itself. But, it follows the negation marker in some clause types. Appearing in negative clauses is the typical property of negative polarity items.

That is exactly how they were conceived from the very beginning. Baker (1970) first used the phrase *negative polarity items* to characterize words which appear in negative clauses.

- (17) a. George won't *ever* see that movie
 b. *George will ever see that movie

The negative polarity items are often pronouns and particles in most Indo-European languages. But, their form is not the important identifying property of them; it is rather their distribution.

Given its distribution with the negation, the *-m* item could then be considered as an NPI.

We have also seen in the above sections that the *m* particle is used to generate the negative polarity items. This again supports the idea that the item is either a negative polarity item, or somehow maker of it.

If that is the case, the negation morphology is not a case of discontinuous morpheme. The relationship between the negation morpheme and the *-m* item is a relation of licensing, Lasnik (1972); Hoeksema (2000) . The negative item licenses the *-m* suffix.

While I strongly believe the idea of the *m* as a negative polarity item is quite a plausible one, I am not going to pursue it. The reason for this mainly comes from the function of the particle in other related Ethiopian Semitic languages. In these languages, this exact morpheme functions as a clause marker. It is used to marker the clause as declarative-indicative one. For that, I assume that this item is somehow related with finiteness. That is what I am going to adopt in this paper.

5 The post-verbal as a finiteness marker

There are reasons to believe that the *-m* particle in Amharic is somehow related to finiteness. In this subsection, I will argue that the post verbal item belongs to the finiteness domain, rather than the negation. But, before doing that, I would like to spell out what I mean by *finiteness* and how finiteness is determined in this language.

First and for most, I understand finiteness in term of clausal properties. Finite clauses are different from nonfinite clauses because they are able to form independent utterances, Nikolaeva (2007). The notion is often expressed in terms of verb form. Matthews (1997), for example, describes it as “...of any verb whose form is such that it can stand in a simple declarative sentence”.

In the same manner, Trask (1996) “[d]enoting a form of a verb or auxiliary which can in principle serve as the only verb form in a sentence and which typically carries the maximum in morphological marking for such categories as tense and agreement permitted in a language...[d]enoting a clause containing such as form ”

As in most languages of world, finiteness has not dedicated morphological realization in Amharic. It is, however, known to exist by indirect properties that the finite clauses display, in contrast to their nonfinite counterparts.

Amharic uses at least three strategies to mark finiteness.

- auxiliaries
- *pfv* verb form
- *-m* clause marker

The verbs in Amharic come in two forms—the imperfective and perfective verbs. The imperfective verbs cannot stand by themselves in a declarative clause. They require finiteness marker items such as auxiliaries.

The perfective verb, on the other hand, is the finite form. Verbs that appear in the perfective can stand by themselves to produce declarative finite clauses. They don’t take tense or other auxiliaries to form finite clauses so far there are not higher functional items higher than them.

An important point to note about finiteness in Amharic is the relevance of relative scope of the features. The clause can be finite iff the feature that are capable of assigning finiteness appear on to of the rest of the verbal projection. The perfective feature, for example, is capable of making the clause finite only to the point that it is not embedded under other non-finiteness features. Consider the relation of the perfective with the progressive aspect, for example.

The perfective verb embedded under the progressive aspect marker needs an auxiliary to form the clause finite.

- (18) Yosef mariam-n sam-ə-at
Josef Mary-acc kiss-3msgS-3fsgO
 ‘Josef kissed Mary.’

The perfective verb is responsible for the finiteness of the clause. But, once a progressive marker projects on top of the imperfective, the clause appears nonfinite.

- (19) #Yosef mariam-n iyyə-sam-ə-at...
Josef Mary-acc prog-kiss-3msgS-3fsgO
 ‘Josef kissing Mary.’

This is not a finite clause even if it contains the perfective verb embedded inside the progressive. This shows that the finiteness is just solely about the presence of a certain feature such as perfective. It is also about the relative scope of those important features. The perfective is able to mark the clause finite iff it appears on top of the verbal cause. If it has been embedded under another function item, it is not able to mark the clause finite. Tense auxiliaries need to be inserted as a last resort to mark the clause finite.

I am proposing exactly the same mechanism to the *-m* particle. What it is doing is what exactly the tense auxiliaries are doing: marking the clause finite in cases where the relevant features have been embedded deep down in the clause. As we have seen above, the progressive is one of those functional items that removes the finiteness marking capability of the perfective. The negation is the other one.

The perfective verbs fail to mark the clause as finite if they are embedded under the negation. That is where the clause requires a last resort finiteness marker which happen to be *-m* in this case.

- (20) #Yosef mariam-n ?al-sam-ə-at...
Josef Mary-acc neg-kiss-3msgS-3fsgO
 ‘Josef not kiss Mary.’

Just like the progressive makes the finite verb infinite, the negative prefix does exactly the same to it. The clause now needs a closer: an item that close the clause so that it could be an independent utterance. Just like the tense auxiliary does for the progressive, the *-m* (emphatic particle) does for the negation. It is a finiteness marker with no clear semantic specification.

Apart from its similarity with the tense auxiliaries in giving a closure to the incomplete clause, there are additional evidences its finiteness properties.

- It is in complementary distribution with tense auxiliaries such as *al-*
- It never appears inside nonfinite clauses (complementizers)
- It functions as a clause marker in related Ethiopian Semitic languages

The first evidence is its complementarity with tense auxiliaries such as *all*. This fact has been noted and extensively discussed in [Demeke \(2003\)](#). Here is an example from that work, page 221:

- (21) ʔal-i-mət'a-m
 neg-1sgS-come.ipfv-CM
 'I will not come.'
- (22) *ʔal-i-mət'-all-hu-m
 neg-1sgS-come.ipfv-aux-1sgS-CM
 'I will not come.'

Given the understanding that tense auxiliaries are one of the finiteness markers, this complementary suggests that these items are probably competing for the same position in the syntax.

The second evidence for the finiteness function of the item is its incompatibility with complement clauses (complementizers). This statement is strictly true in cases where the complementizer is non-finite clause selecting one such as the *ʔndi*. The *-m* item never appears with this complementizer.

- (23) *ʔndi-a-y-sim-at-m²fəlləg-əčč
 comp-neg-3msgS-kiss.ipfv-3fsgS-m want-3fsgS
 'She wanted him not to kiss her...'

Note that this complementizer selects nonfinite complement clauses, [Workneh \(2021\)](#). Based on this, the fact that the *-m* item never appears inside this complementizer is an evidence that it is a finiteness marker.

Finally, and most importantly, the particle functions as finiteness marker in declarative clauses of related languages. As ([Demeke 2003](#): chapter 8) extensively discussed, the *m* particle in Muher, Chaha and many other languages that are related to Amharic, is one of the clause markers which mark the clause as indicative-declarative. In the literature, it is known to mark the verbs as "indicates their being main verbs, the absence of which would make the forms subordinate", [Hetzron \(1977\)](#). This description is exactly what we have defined as finiteness based on Matthews' definition. It is also sometimes described as a tense marker, again another sign that it is contingent with finiteness feature.

Here are some example from [Demeke \(2003\)](#):

² Note that the *-m* which appears as a focus marker should not be confused with the emphatic particle *-m* we are discussing here. Whether the two are underlying unified or just homophones is not clear to me. I will return to this in future works. For now, I assume they are simply homophonous items. In the sense of the focus marker, the *-m* particle appears licit in this sentence.

- (24) *nəqqar-ə-CM*
pull.pfv-3msgS-m
 ‘He pulled out.’ Chaha
- (25) *səbbər-ə-m*
break.pfv-3msgS-CM
 ‘He broke.’ Muher
- (26) *Kəbbədə wərr-ə-m*
Kebede go.pfv-3msgS-CM
 ‘Kebede went.’ Ezha

It is important to note that the *m* particle is not contingent with negation in any of these languages. This again confirms the claim that the *m* particle is not a negation item.

6 Explaining the correlation

In the GB literature, the NPI are assumed to appear with the negation elements because they need to be c-commanded or licensed by those elements, Lasnik (1972); Laka (1990). A slightly different implementation of the idea considers the NPI as anaphora that need to be bind by negation items, Progovac (1993) . For cases where they appear under non-negative contexts, they are assumed be licensed by null polarity operators.

As I have noted above, one of the main advantages of assuming the *m* particle to be an NPI is the fact that it can naturally explain the distribution of the item. NPIs are known to follow the negation markers. A number of works have already developed theories to explain why NPIs follow the negation items.

Those theories cannot be applied to the particle we are discussing here because we are considering it as finiteness marker. As such, we need a new theory why the item appears to follow the negation.

I will here propose that the two items appear together because they merge as constituents. The idea is based on Collins & Postal (2014).

- (27) Constituency
 The *-m* appears to follow the *neg* because it is a constituent of it.

According to this hypothesis, the two items go together because they merge as constituents. More specifically, I suggest that the finiteness marker select the *neg* item.

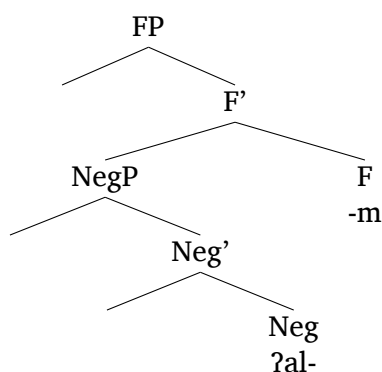


Figure 1: -m selects neg

- (28) -m subcategorizes for neg
The -m selects the NEG.

This is a more specific form of the constituency hypothesis. One obvious way of forming a constituency via selection. The subcategorization specification of the -m item forces it to merge with the neg item only.

The next question is then why they appear in separate positions if they merge together.

Given the complementarity of the m particle with tense auxiliaries, I assume that it appears in the TP layer.

7 Position of the items

In the above section, I have proposed that -m particle to select the neg item. That explains why they appear together in a clause. In this subsection, we are going to see why the -m appears as in post-verbal position while the negation item appears in the pre-verbal verbal position. This difference in position needs to be explained.

Given the structure sketched in ??, the reason why the negitem appears in the pre-verbal position can be explained by the movement of the verb, or linearization of the items.

To start with the movement, Amharic is already proposed to have a verbal movement, Wondem (2014). The head movement approach can explain the position of the items by assuming different positions of the verbal adjunction.

According to this analysis, the verb right adjoins the negation, and left adjoins the finiteness item. That makes the negative item to appear on the left side of the verb, and the m item to the right of it.

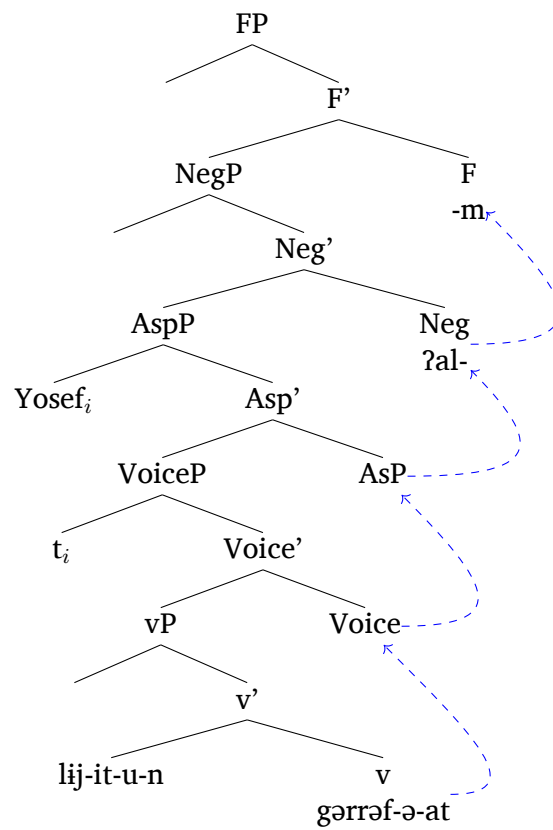


Figure 2: The verb raises to FP and incorporates with the NPI

The linearization analysis of the type we have in [Brody \(2003\)](#) or any other means can also be used to explain the position of the items. For the linearization system, what we need to say is quite similar to the head movement. The negative item linearizes before and the finiteness item linearizes after the verb.

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