

# **FORM AND FUNCTION OF CONVERBS IN OROMO**

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## ABSTRACT

This study describes the form and function of converbs in Oromo. Oromo converbs usually cannot be marked for tense and mood in contrast to main verbs. There are three converb forms: the generalized converb marked by a lengthened final vowel of a conjugated perfective, imperative or jussive verb, and two invariable specialized converbs marked by the suffixes *-aa* or *-naan*. While the generalized converb usually denotes a sequence of events, the converb in *-aa* expresses a simultaneous event to the main clause verb while the converb in *-naan* is used in habitual or repetitive expressions.

The converbs most frequently denote simultaneous and consecutive events in relation to a main-clause verb but also occurs in other adverbial functions.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

1, 2, 3	First, second, third person
ABF	Autobenefactive
AGN	Agent noun
AUX.PAST	Past-tense auxiliary
CNV	Converb
CONC	Concessive
DEF	Definite
F	Feminine
FOC	Focus
GER	Gerund
HAB	Habitual
IMP	Imperative
INF	Infinitive
INST	Instrumental
IPFV	Imperfective
JUSS	Jussive
M	Masculine
NEG	Negation
NOM	Nominative
PFV	Perfective
PL	Plural
PRG	Progressive
PTCP	Participle
SG	Singular

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides background information about the Oromo people and their language. It also contains the statement of the problem, the objective of the study and its significance, scope, and methodology.

### *1.1 The Oromo People and Their Language*

The Oromo people probably comprise the largest single ethnic group in Africa (Bender, Mulugeta and Stinson 1976:130). The Oromo are one of the major linguistic groups in Ethiopia and the major member of the Oromoid subgroup of the Lowland East Cushitic branch (Appleyard, 2006:103). They live in the eastern, central and western parts of Ethiopia “stretching from close to the Sudan border in the west, through Addis Ababa, and beyond Harar in the east, from northern Kenya in the south, up and east of the rift valley and to Wallo in the north” (Gragg, 1982: xiii).

Oromia is the largest regional state in Ethiopia in terms of population and land size. The Oromia region covers an area of 367,000 square kilometers. It has a warm and mild climate (Tolemariam, 2009:6). According to the 1994 population and housing census, the Oromo population was 18,732,525 of which 9,371,228 were males and 9,361,297 females (CSA 1995).

The Oromo language is one of the major languages in Ethiopia and the largest member of the Oromoid subgroup of the Lowland East Cushitic branch (Appleyard, 2006:103). Oromo is the third most widely spoken language in Africa after Arabic and Hausa (Mahdi, 1995: xi). It is spoken in most parts of Ethiopia and in northern Kenya. It has been used as a vernacular language for a long time until it became the working language of the Oromia regional state in 1991 (Tolemariam, 2009:6).

There are three main dialect clusters of Oromo: (i) the central-western group, with at least nine million speakers, comprising the Mecha, Tulama, Wallo, and Raya varieties (all spoken in Ethiopia); (ii) the eastern group including Borana, Guji, Arsi and Gabra (spoken in southern Ethiopia and adjacent parts of Kenya); and (iii) Orma (spoken along the Tana river in Kenya and along the Juba River in Southern Somalia) and Waata (spoken along the Kenyan coast to the south of Orma) (Appleyard, 2006:103).

Oromo has 24 consonant phonemes and five vowels represented in the Latin-based *Qubee* orthography. Its morphology is moderately complex similar in categories and extent to other Cushitic languages (Appleyard, 2006:103 f.). Oromo is a tone-accent language whereby tone does not distinguish between lexical items but is linked with morphological and syntactic categories (Appleyard, 2006:104).

## *1.2 Statement of the Problem*

Even though the converb is a major topic in descriptive linguistics, there is very little typological research on converbs in the Oromo language. However, some earlier studies (for instance, Azeb and Dimmendaal (2006), Griefenow-Mewis (2001), Gragg (1976) and Stroomer (1995)) deal with the converb as a grammatical category in Oromo. They ascribe various functions to the converbs in Oromo and call them by various names, like *gerund*, *participial*, *consecutive*, *serial verb* (cf. Azeb and Dimmendaal, 2006:426). The use of these various terms hides the well-established cross-linguistic morphological, syntactic and pragmatic features of converbal constructions. This may have to do with the fact that the concept of converb is still not well applied to Oromo. Consequently, Oromo grammars do usually not use this term. Indeed, the converb in Oromo as a cross-linguistically valid grammatical category has barely been recognized up to these days. Considering this gap, this study attempts an in-depth description of converbs in Oromo.

## *1.3 Objective of the Study*

The general objective of this study is to identify and describe the forms and functions of converbs in Oromo. The study has the following specific objectives:

- Identify the grammatical form of the converbs in Oromo, and

- Describe the grammatical function of the various converbs in Oromo.

### *1.4 Significance of the Study*

The present study represents basic research and is believed to have the following significance:

- It will enhance the knowledge of Oromo grammar, specifically with regard to converbs.
- It will contribute to the descriptive study of Cushitic languages and to linguistic typology in general.
- It can serve as a source of information for educational grammars on the Oromo language.

### *1.5 Scope of the Study*

A complete descriptive analysis of a language requires the phonological, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic description of that language. However, this study limits itself to the description of the form and function of converbs, but puts only little or no attention to other categories of the verb morphology.

The data is limited to the various Oromo varieties spoken in Ethiopia; it does not consider the Oromo varieties spoken only in Kenya.

## 1.6 Methodology

This study is a descriptive research in nature. It relies on primary linguistic data gathered through interviews with native speakers of Oromo, as well as on published data from Oromo grammars, like Stroomer (1995), Griefenow-Mewis (2001), Owens (1985), and from Oromo dictionaries, like Hinsene (2010; 2012).

As the researcher is not a speaker of Oromo, three native speakers of Oromo were consulted during fieldwork, namely Enkoga Asefa in Jimma from 20–24 October 2011, Girma Terefe in Ambo from 12–16 February 2012, and Tolosa Nemera in Neqemt from 3–7 April 2012. All three were born at the respective places. Besides their native language, Oromo, they also speak Amharic and English.

The elicitation of the data on converbs in Oromo was based on a questionnaire prepared in Amharic as metalanguage. The questionnaire contains sentences and phrases focusing on the form and function of the converb. Furthermore, one text was recorded (see Appendix).

The data were transcribed using the Oromo orthography – *qubee*, which is quite close to a phonetic representation of the language.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first part of this section defines the converb and deals with the form and function of converb from a typological cross-linguistic perspective mainly based on Haspelmath's (1995), Nedjalkov's (1995) and Ebert's (2008). It also contains some general information about converbs in the Ethiopian context and in Oromo. The second part of this section reviews previous works on the Oromo grammar by focusing on subtopics that seem to be relevant for the description of converbal constructions.

#### *2.1 Converb in a Cross-Linguistic Typological Perspective*

##### 2.1.1 Definition of Converb

Linguists define the term *converb* differently. Morphosyntactically, Haspelmath (1995: 3) defines converb as a non-finite verb whose main function is to mark adverbial subordinate clauses. Nedjalkov (1995: 97), in contrast, defines converb as a finite but dependent verb form that is marked by a verbal affix rather than by a free conjunction. Haspelmath's definition is supported by Ebert (2008:8) who mentions the following:

“A general converb connects two or more events and only one verb – the last verb in SOV languages – carries finite markers.”

This implies that a converb is a non-finite verb which is less finite than main-clause verbs (Ebert, 2008: 23 f.). Ebert (2008: 16) mentions that person and aspect markers which are applied to fully finite verbs may also be part of converbs. However, according to Ebert (2008:16), a *prototypical* converb consists of the verb stem and a suffix; there are none of the tense-aspect or person markers that appear on the finite verb.

Syntactically converbs cannot be used in independent sentences; they generally do not express mood and tense but depend on the superordinate verb for this information. Converbs, too, often depend on their superordinate verb for the information of reference to their subject (Haspelmath 1995:23).

Haspelmath (1995: 4) considers the converb as a part of the inflectional paradigm of verbs. This indicates that a converb cannot be considered as a verb plus a complementizer or subordinator. Haspelmath (1995:5 ff.) further indicates that the converb is a verb form whose main function is to modify other verbs but never occurs in argument position or as an attribute to a noun. This implies that a converb belongs to the verbal domain and is used as an adverb to modify the reference verb but never a noun.

Nedjalkov (1995: 99) suggests that converbs are constituents of complex verbs often formed by non-standard means of word formation and by standard rules including (semi-) auxiliary verbs that express various aspectual meanings. It is also explained that converbs are constituents of synthetic and analytic forms that are part of the tense and aspect paradigm of the verb. This conception contrasts with Haspelmath (1995) and Ebert (2008). Nedjalkov (1995:97) distinguishes converbs from other verbs by the following criteria:

“Converbs can occupy the position of adjuncts (adverbial), but cannot occupy the position of the only predicate of a simple sentence (without additional auxiliary elements), the position of nominal attributes, the position of a clause actant (i.e., it cannot depend on verbs such as begin, order, etc.), the position of a nominal actant (i.e., it does not occur in subject and object position).”

Similarly, Ylikoski (2003:195) also subsumes under the term converb verbal adverbs, adverbial participles, adverbial modifiers, and subordinate adverbial clauses. Nedjalkov’s converb definition puts more stress on the functional role of converbs whereas Haspelmath (1995:7) focuses on non-finiteness as an important feature of converbs. Haspelmath (1995:7) also states that there is a type of subordinate construction that is neither argument nor adnominal, nor is it clearly

adverbial, which is used to convey a sequence of successive events, i.e., a clause-chaining construction, which is also expressed through converbs.

Typologically, converbs are found in the SOV languages of Asia, Ethiopia and South America (Ebert 2008: 7). Concerning the origin of converbs, Coupe (2006:145) states that the term converb was first used in the linguistic description of Altaic languages.

Based on the above definitions, we can conclude that a converb is morphologically non-finite verb form that prototypically does not inflected for person, number, tense, aspect and mood. Syntactically, a converb is a dependent verb that lacks a subordinating conjunction. Converbs do not occur as a main verb in independent clauses (Nedjalkov 1995:97). Generally, a converb cannot occupy the position of finite verb forms, of a participle, of an infinitive and of a gerund; but it can occupy the position of an adverbial.

Semantically, Haspelmath (1995:7) defines converbs as forms that generally modify verbs, clauses or sentences, but not nouns or noun phrases. It is also used for clause chaining construction to convey a sequence of successive events (Haspelmath 1995:7). Converbs can be paraphrased by means of coordinate conjunctions in language that allow coordinated clauses (Haspelmath 1995:8).

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