

On the Lack of Intervention Effects in Amharic

1. The issue An underlying assumption of research on intervention effects, in which a quantificational or focusing element preceding a *wh*-phrase leads to degradedness (1a), is that these effects are universal (Beck 2006), and should thus follow from basic properties of the grammar. However, unlike any other language documented until now, Amharic does not generally exhibit these effects (2). In order to account for the exceptionality of Amharic, two competing classes of approaches to intervention are assessed here: approaches which take hierarchical structure into account, such as Beck (2006) and Kim (2005), and non-structural analyses (e.g., Tomioka 2007, Hamlaoui & Mathieu 2008), whereby the effect is read off the linear string. The results of this evaluation favor the latter type of approach.

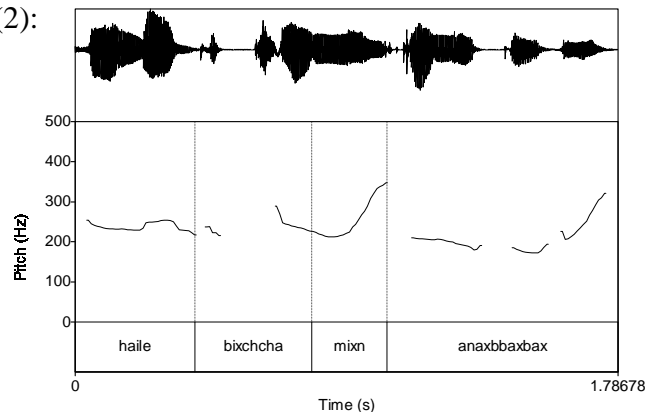
2. Structural approaches According to Beck (2006), intervention effects derive from the binding of a *wh*-phrase by a focus-sensitive operator (i.e., the intervener), rather than the required Q operator in C^0 . Under this approach, Amharic could evade intervention effects if potential interveners, like subjects in general, are positioned above the Q operator in C^0 , allowing the necessary relation between Q and the *wh*-phrase to be established. However, beyond general difficulties with structural accounts of this type (Tomioka 2007), there are two Amharic-specific problems with this analysis: (i) certain types of NPs, such as reflexives, are assumed to remain in a low base-generated position (indicated by the impossibility of object marking in (3)), but yet do not derive degradedness when modified by a focus particle and c-commanding a *wh*-phrase (3); (ii) the assumption that multiple elements adjoin to CP in Amharic, necessary to explain the absence of intervention effects with non-matrix subjects (4), leads to the incorrect prediction that adverbs associated with the matrix clause should be able to follow the embedded subject (5).

3. Non-structural approaches Tomioka (2007) claims that intervention effects are the result of a mismatch between syntactic structure and information structure. Following Vallduví (1992), *wh*-questions are divided into a focus (the *wh*-phrase) and a ground, the latter partitioned into a topic-like link and tail. Interveners must thus occupy the ground, but they cannot do so: their semantics prevents them from serving as links, while their prosodic prominence precludes them from being in the tail. Amharic is then exceptional in allowing interveners to precede a *wh*-phrase due to unique properties of its prosody and information structure. First, interveners can be tails due to the non-obligatory association of focus particles with pitch prominence in Amharic (6), while other languages require scrambling the *wh*-phrase over the intervener to derive the same prosodic profile (1b). Second, Amharic evades intervention effects by allowing focus particles to take topics (whether or not morphologically marked) as their argument ((7), (2b)), unlike other languages (8). Such examples show no degradedness because the focused topic is not integrated in the information structure of the question. The fact that intervention effects are absent even when the initial constituent is not interpreted as a topic (2a) casts further doubt on the structural hypothesis, which ties the lack of intervention effects to a left peripheral position.

4. Extending the analysis Alternative questions provide additional support for the latter approach. Amharic also lacks intervention effects in such contexts; i.e., an intervener preceding a disjunctive phrase does not rule out the alternative question reading, and the same two interpretations found in *wh*-questions are derived ((9); cf. English (10)).

5. Conclusion A non-structural account of intervention effects better explains the Amharic data and correlates with independent aspects of its grammar, thus providing a general argument for this type of approach. In addition, the data presented here contributes to our knowledge of the typology of information structure, including the ways in which elements of information structure, such as topics, may interact with each other and with other components of the grammar.

- (1) a. *Minsu-man nuku-lûl po-ass-ni? (Korean; Beck 2006:3)
 Minsu-only who-ACC see-PAST-Q
 'Who did only Minsu see?'
 b. nuku-lûl Minsu-man po-ass-ni?
 who-ACC Minsu-only see-PAST-Q
 'Who did only Minsu see?'
- (2) haile bəčča mən anäbbäb-ä?
 Haile only what read.PER-3MS
 a. 'What did only Haile read?' b. 'Only as for Haile, what did he read?'
- (3) haile lä-ras-u bəčča mən sät't'-ä-(*w)?
 Haile to-himself only what give.PER-3MS-3MS_o
 'What did Haile give only to himself?'
- (4) girma haile bəčča mən ənd-anäbbäb-ä y-asəb-all?
 Girma Haile only what that-read.PER-3MS 3MS-think.IMP-AUX.3MS
 'What does Girma think that only Haile read?'
- (5) haile <ahun> girma <*ahun> tənant mäs'haf ənd-anäbbäb-ä y-awk'-all.
 Haile now Girma now yesterday book that-read.PER-3MS 3MS-know.IMP-AUX.3MS
 'Haile now knows that Girma read a book yesterday.'
- (6) Pitch track for (2):



- (7) haile(-ss) bəčča ya-n mäs'haf anäbbäb-ä.
 Haile-TOP only that-ACC book read.PER-3MS
 'Only as for Haile, he read that book.'
 (Compatible with a context where each book was read by more than one person.)
- (8) *Taro-wa-sika, *Taro-sika-wa (Japanese)
 Taro-TOP-only Taro-only-TOP
- (9) haile bəčča šay wäyəss buna t'ät'-a? [✓AltQ] / [✓Yes/NoQ]
 Haile only tea or coffee drink.PER-3MS
 a. 'Did only Haile drink tea or coffee?' b. 'Only as for Haile, did he drink tea or coffee?'
- (10) Does only John like Mary or Susan?
 a. #Mary. [*AltQ] b. Yes. [✓Yes/NoQ] (Beck & Kim 2006:167)

Selected References: Beck, S. 2006. Intervention effects follow from focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics* 14:1–56. • Hamlaoui, F. & Mathieu, E. 2008. On the role of phonology and discourse in French *wh*-questions. Paper presented at CGG 18. • Kim, S.-S. 2005. Focus intervention effects in questions. Paper presented at Theoretical East Asian Languages 3, Harvard University. • Tomioka, S. 2007. Pragmatics of LF intervention effects: Japanese and Korean *wh*-interrogatives. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39:1570–1590.