The investigation was carried out in the framework of the project #2992 supported by the Ministry of Science and Education of Russia. I am deeply grateful to Dr. S. Loesov, who carefully read the draft version and amended the text considerably. Needless to say, all the errors are mine. Note the following abbreviations: Amh. = Amharic; Arg. = Argobba; Čah. = Čaha; Decl. = declarative; Dob. = Dobbi; End. = Endegañ; Enm. = Ennemor; ES = Ethio-Semitic; Gaf. = Gafat; Har. = Harari; Kst. = Kestane; LPC = long prefix conjugation; MSA = Modern South-Arabian; Msq. = Masqan; Muh. = Muher; IMPF = imperfective; NEG = negative; PC = prefix conjugation; PS = Proto-Semitic; SPC = short prefix conjugation; Sel. = Selṭi; SES = South Ethio-Semitic; Wol. = Wolane.

The Proto-Semitic “Asseverative *la-” and the Innovative 1SG Prefixes in South Ethio-Semitic Languages

Maria Bulakh

1 Introduction

The verbal paradigms of the prefix conjugation in many Ethio-Semitic (ES) languages have subject indexes (in traditional terminology, subject agreement markers) which coincide in shape—all having the proto-form *(l)V*—but not necessarily in meaning and distribution. At least some of them go back to the common Semitic asseverative particle *la-. This particle has been reconstructed in Huehnergard 1983, where the functions of its reflexes across Semitic are described. According to Huehnergard (1983: 579–580, 592), the “asseverative *la-” is the source of the “injunctive” proclitic la- in Ge’ez and of a number of subject indexes in modern ES languages.

Huehnergard’s reconstruction implies the existence of a proto-ES “injunctive” particle *la-, compatible only with jussive verb forms. Ge’ez is then the only ES language which preserves this element intact as far as its shape, functions, and distribution are concerned. In Tigrinya, no reflexes of the “injunctive” *la- have been found. In Tigre and South Ethio-Semitic (SES), the reflexes are no more clitics: they have developed into subject indexes of the verbal paradigms. Such a development is not an exclusive feature of ES (similar developments came about in Akkadian, Aramaic, and MSA). The innovative prefixes in SES are mostly limited to 1SG.

Huehnergard (1983) aims at reconstructing several formally and functionally similar elements of proto-Semitic. In his brief, albeit very accurate, analysis...
of the ES data he discusses only the jussive subject indexes and makes no claim concerning the indicative paradigms. Yet certain innovative subject indexes of the indicative are traceable to the *la- of the ES jussive. In Bulakh 2013 I reconstructed the way in which a jussive prefix la- had penetrated into the indicative paradigm of Tigre.

A closer investigation of ES material reveals that the subject indexing prefixes containing the element *l (henceforth referred to as *l-prefixes) do not necessarily all go back to the same entity. For instance, the negative indicative paradigms in Zay and Wolane are analyzed by R. Meyer (2005: 191–192; 2006: 107, 110) as containing a negative prefix ʔa- and a 1SG prefix -l: ʔa-l-säwwər-u NEG-1SG-return.IMPF-DECL 'I do not return'. Yet historically -l- of the negative paradigm is not a subject index but a part of the negative marker ʔal- (cf. Section 4.1).

Some other cases are less transparent and require special consideration. The present investigation explores the innovations in the 1SG prefixes in various paradigms of the prefix conjugation in SES and attempts to establish their origins, various strategies of readjustments of the subject indexes, as well as various factors that may have influenced these readjustments.

2 Shared Innovations, Parallel Development and Areal Diffusion

The analysis of the innovations in the 1SG of the prefix conjugation allows us to establish several isoglosses. Some of them are shared innovations in R. Hetzron’s (1976) sense, that is, they are inherited from a common proto-stage. Others are parallel developments (common drifts).

Parallel developments may take place in languages that have no contact with each other as well as in neighboring languages. In the latter case, one usually surmises areal diffusion rather than truly independent changes in individual languages (see Aikhenvald and Dixon 2006: 4). Therefore, geographic proximity and/or intensive contact between separate languages within SES should not be overlooked in the present investigation.

As is well known, ES languages have always existed in a situation of manifold contact, and many features characteristic of ES languages have areal rather than genealogical origin. Special studies on language contact in Ethiopia mostly focus on the interaction between Cushitic and Semitic (e.g., Crass and Meyer 2011). Contacts between separate Ethio-Semitic languages have received less attention. Still, it is an important factor which cannot be ignored in Ethio-Semitic studies. Adstratal influence of Amharic as a lingua franca and the language of instruction is frequently mentioned in modern descriptions of other