

# Asymmetrical Representation of Gender in Amharic<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In gender linguistics, it is customary to observe the correlation between language and socially constructed gender roles. Language users show male and female language behaviors in their discourse and pragmatics. The idea of societal perception of gender is also reflected in the structure of a language. We learn from the literature that a number of African languages have gender-biased patriarchal grammars. Amharic is one of them. This paper discusses the linguistic and pragmatic representation of gender in Amharic, a gendered language showing masculine and feminine distinction in its grammar. Gender representation in this language is asymmetrical heavily influenced by pragmatics. Masculine is the default gender with more prominence than feminine. The linguistic coding of gender carries socially significant meanings reflecting a male-biased grammar. The personal and demonstrative pronouns, generic and proper nouns, nominals and other word classes are inherently masculine. Masculine gender operates not only for nouns with + MALE feature but also for nouns with neuter gender. Any noun with - ANIMATE feature is encoded as male in the verb. Whereas masculine conveys augmentation, feminine conveys diminution. The data and texts for this study were collected from primary source (introspection – author's native repertoire) and secondary sources (grammatical descriptions and novels written in Amharic).

Key words: Language, Society, Gender, Pragmatics, Correlation

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## **Introduction**

Research on the relationship between language and gender started systematically in the 1970s. Since then, gender issues have attracted the attention of experts in behavioral, cognitive and cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> Though the relationship between language and gender is obvious, the attention given by linguists to study the formal differences in the representation of gender in grammatical structures has been so far meager. It is only in recent years that the correlation between language and socially constructed gender roles and the reality that language users show male and female language behaviors in their discourse and pragmatics have attracted the consideration of sociolinguists (McConnell-Ginet, 1988; Cheshirl, 2002). The bulk of the literature on gender and language focuses on the speech behavior of men and women and the conversational styles they follow (Wodak, 1997). Thus so far, the correlation between language and gender or the male and female asymmetry has been widely perceived as merely a matter of language use. By and large, women's language is believed to reflect their conservatism, prestige consciousness, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity and solidarity whereas men's language reflects their toughness, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy and control (Wodak, 2001).

In recent sociolinguistic research, the idea of societal perception of gender inequality as reflected in the structural systems of a language has also come to the forefront. From the Chomskyan model of Universal Grammar (UG), we learn that languages are alike in their underlying structures but different in their surface structures. Hence, at the level of surface structure (performance), some languages depict gender inequality in their grammar, others do not. Indo-European languages like German and Polish show the equal treatment of men and women in their grammar through affixes which is believed to be reflected in their everyday life. On the other hand, the feminist Dale Spender (1980), considers English as a 'man-made' language that has contributed to women's oppression (Pauwels, 1998). The English 3SG has been considered awkward, at least by feminists, and hence there were attempts to coin a new sex-neutral pronoun (Crystal, 1997). The works of Labov (1966), Milroy (1992) and Trudgill (1972) are still influential regarding the socio-

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<sup>3</sup> According to Anthony Giddens, 'gender' concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females and 'sex' is a 'biological or anatomical differences between men and women,' (Wodak, 1997).

grammatical descriptions of gender with a focus on American and British English. Many other empirical studies have touched on the structural aspects of language that vividly show male preference.

The pragmatic analysis of some African languages reveals that women have restricted languages that make them different from men (Wolff, 2000). In the majority of cases in Africa, men can speak about taboo concepts such as body parts and sexual activities, whereas in women speech, such expressions are restricted or replaced by euphemistic or culturally appropriate forms in public discourse. It is customary that adult female speakers of these African languages do not address their husbands, in-laws and their immediate family by name. According to Southworth and Daswani (1974:235), 'In several parts of India, a wife may not mention her husband's name (and in some more conservative groups, any name or word with similar sounds); she must refer to him as 'he' or 'the children's father' or 'the man of the house' (in some cases, even the expression 'my husband' is not allowed); census-takers and others wishing to know the name of a woman's husband often are obliged to ask a neighbour.' Cited in Wodak (1997:10), Postl (1991:89) writes that, 'Due to their long history as public n-makers, men not only determine the economic, political and social orientation of social life, but influence the functioning and the semantic construction of each individual language'. It appears that a language with gender distinction need not automatically be patriarchal. It could be matriarchal, or even balanced. Apparently, a number of African languages have gender-biased patriarchal grammars as if they are mere inventions of males (see details in Corbett, 1991). However, gender linguistics remains a neglected area in this part of the world which is believed to have rich linguistic data and fascinating gender-related issues yet to be researched.<sup>4</sup>

This paper discusses the linguistic and pragmatic representation of gender in Amharic. I argue that male gender is more prominent than female gender and hence Amharic is one of the African languages with highly male-biased grammar. There are two types of relationship between language and gender: (a) the linguistic codings of gender which do not carry any socially significant meaning beyond the differentiation of signs that are necessary for communication and (b) the linguistic codings of gender which carry socially

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<sup>4</sup> Roza Taddese and Amanuel Raga (see references) have attempted to describe in their MA theses the gender-biased ideologies in Tigrinya and Afaan Oromo, respectively.

significant meanings reflecting gender bias. The major focus in this paper is (b) in which linguistic codings have social implications. The personal and demonstrative pronouns, generic and proper nouns, nominals and other grammatical features reflect polarity of the feminine gender. Masculine gender markers are used not only for nouns with + MALE feature but also for generic and plural nouns with neuter gender. Any noun with - ANIMATE feature is encoded as male in the verb. The masculine gender conveys augmentation, the feminine diminution. The data and texts were collected from two major sources: primary source (introspection – author's native repertoire) and secondary sources (grammatical descriptions and novels written in Amharic).

### **Gender asymmetry in corpus linguistics**

In this section, the bias of grammar and pragmatics towards male predominance is supported from the linguistic corpus of Amharic. Amharic is a gendered language whose grammatical structure is heavily influenced by pragmatic principles. Definite nouns show gender distinction between feminine and masculine through the definite marker morphemes *-u* (M) and *-itu* (F), as in *fyyäl-u* 'the (HE) goat' vs. *fyyäl-itu* 'the (SHE) goat'.<sup>5</sup> Nouns agree in person, number and gender by portmanteau morphemes as in the verb *bäll-a* 'He ate' vs. *bäll-at/ftf* 'She ate'. In pronouns, feminine and masculine grammatical genders are distinctly marked in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. In the plural pronouns, gender distinction is neutralized and hence the two sexes share the same form (cf. (1) below). Bare adjectives (i.e. adjectives which do not formally modify any noun) behave like nouns and hence, though they underlyingly modify their covert heads, they assume gender in a way similar to nouns as in *addis-u* 'the (HE) new' vs. *addis-itu* 'the (SHE) new'. Amharic has gender specifiers for biologically male and female animals and human beings. In this case, *wänd* refers to 'male' as in *wänd lidʒ* 'male child (boy)', *wänd bäg* 'male sheep', etc. and *set* refers to 'female' as in *set lidʒ* 'female child' (girl), *set bäg* 'female sheep (ewe)', etc.

Some linguistic structures of Amharic are deeply gender-inclusive typifying the language to be one of the languages with clear cases of male-preferring

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<sup>5</sup> Baye (2000) treats *-it* and *-u* in *-itu* as separate morphemes. Leslau (2000) treats *-it* and *-u* as one morpheme *-itu*.

features. In pronouns, the preponderance of the masculine gender is obvious through feminine gender polarity as shown below.

(1)			Singular	Plural
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	M	ant-ä	innä-antä
		F	antʃ-i	
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	M	irs-u	innä-irsu
		F	irs-wa	

As shown in the data above, in both the 2SG and 3SG pronouns, gender is marked and hence the language has distinct forms for the feminine and masculine genders. In such instances, the biological gender corresponds to natural or biological gender. The base form of the 2SG is *ant-* and the gender markers are *-ä* for 2MS and *-i* for 2FS (Note that *-ä* is a 3MS marker in finite verbs as in *t'al-ä* 'He dropped.', *hed-ä* 'He went.', etc. and *-i* is a 2FS marker in imperative forms as in *g#b-i* 'enter! (2FS)', *sam-i* 'kiss! (2FS)', etc.). The form *antʃi* is derived from the underlying form *anti* after going through the palatalization process: *t > ʃ/-i*. Similarly, the base form for the 3SG is *#s-* and the gender markers are *-u* for the 3MS (just as in the possessive constructions such as *bet-u* 'his house', *lidʒ-u* 'his child', etc.) and *-wa* for the 3FS (as in *bet-wa* 'her house', *lidʒ-wa* 'her child', etc.). As can be seen from the data, the 2nd and 3rd person plural forms are derivatives of the 2MS and 3MS, respectively. In other words, in the plural pronouns, the masculine forms appear to be the bases. There are neither neuter plural forms nor plural forms which make the 2FS and 3FS their base. This is perhaps one of the major distinctions between Amharic and languages such as Ge'ez, Tigre, Tigrinya and some Gurage languages in which the 2nd and 3rd plural pronouns are distinct for the corresponding singular feminine and masculine pronouns.<sup>6</sup> Even if a speaker refers to a group of female persons in the 2PL or 3PL, the pronouns are always *#nnä-antä* or *#nnä-#su*, derivative of the 2MS and 3SG together with the plural marker *#nnä*. In this regard, it is axiomatic that plural pronouns are masculine gender marked as clearly seen from the structure and hence should refer to male references. However, these pronouns are

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<sup>6</sup> The distinction of gender in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> plural is typical for all classical Semitic languages and goes back to Proto-Semitic (Maria Bulakh, p.c.).

pragmatically perceived as gender neuter and are used for both genders.

In the following proximal and distal demonstrative pronouns and locative deictics, the plural demonstrative pronouns, like in the 2nd and 3rd personal pronouns, are derived from the corresponding singular masculine pronouns.

(2)

Demonstrative pronouns

	Singular	Plural
Proximal	yi-h (M) yi-h-iftfi (F)	innä-yi-h > inn-yi-h > inn-ih or innä-iz-yi-h
Distal	y-a (M) y-a-iftfi-i (F)	innä-ya > inn-ya or innä-iz-ya

Locative deictics

Proximal	iz-yih (M) iz-yi(h)-iftfi (F)
Distal	iz-ya (M) iz-ya-iftfi (F)

As shown in (2), the singular feminine pronouns have the form: MASCULINE DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUN + (*#*)*iftfi*. Hence, masculine demonstrative pronouns are derived from the gender-neuter base and feminine demonstratives are derived from the masculine demonstrative pronouns. The AGR masculine marker for proximal is *-h* and for distal is *-a*. The morpheme *-h* marks 2MS in verb paradigms as in *yaz-h* 'You held.', *mal-h* 'You swore.', *sak'-h* 'You laughed.', etc. and the morpheme *-a* marks 3MS as in *bäll-a* 'He ate.', *särr-a* 'He worked', *täjj-a* 'He slept.', etc. The feminine marker for both proximal and distal is *-ftfi*. Again, the same morpheme marks 3FS in verb paradigms as in *yaz-äftfi* 'She held.', *mal-äftfi* 'She swore.', *sak'-äftfi* 'She laughed.', etc. The morphemes *-i* and *-a* mark proximal and distal pronouns, respectively. Here again, the plural counterparts that are derived from the masculine singular demonstrative pronouns serve both feminine and masculine deictics. Hence, while referring to female persons in the plural, the speaker still uses the form consisting of the plural prefix plus the masculine

pronoun. Plural demonstrative pronouns and locative deictics bear the masculine gender marker and hence have a masculine reading. Nevertheless, speakers perceive them as gender neuter: an incompatibility between structure and language use. From the locative deictic *ē-yih*, we can derive the connector *sälä-ēyih* ‘therefore/because of this’ and from the distal locative deictic *ē-ya*, we can derive *kä-ēya* ‘then’ which all contain the masculine form.

The inequity of gender in Amharic grammar has a wider array of contexts. In the following singular and plural forms of adjectives and nouns, the use of the masculine form as base is observed concretely:

(3)

Singular	Plural
ityop’iyawi-t (F)	*ityop’iyawi-t-yan/*ityop’iyawi-t-otʃtʃ/*ityop’iyawi-t-yan-otʃtʃ
ityop’iyawi (M) ‘Ethiopian’	ityop’iyawi-yan/ityop’iyawi-otʃtʃ/ ityop’iyawi-yan-otʃtʃ (Ge'ez pattern) (Amharic pattern) (double plural)
mämhir-t (F)	*mämhir-t-an/*mämhir-t-otʃtʃ/*mämhir-t-an-otʃtʃ
mämhir (M) ‘teacher’	mämhir-an/ mämhir-otʃtʃ/ mämhir-an-otʃtʃ (Ge'ez pattern) (Amharic pattern) (double plural)
k’iddis-t (F)	*k’idis-t-an/*k’idis-t-otʃtʃ/*k’idis-t-an-otʃtʃ
k’iddus (M) ‘holy’	k’idus-an/ k’idus-otʃtʃ/ k’idus-an-otʃtʃ (Ge'ez pattern) (Amharic pattern) (double plural)
kibir-t (F)	*kibir-t-an/*kibir-t-otʃtʃ/*kibir-t-an-otʃtʃ
kibur (M) ‘respected’	kibur-an/ kibur-otʃtʃ/ kibur-an-otʃtʃ (Ge'ez pattern) (Amharic pattern) (double plural)

In Amharic, pluralization in nouns is shown mainly in four ways: through suffixing *-otʃtʃ/-wotʃtʃ*; suffixing *-an*, *-at*, *-awñt* and *-yan* (archaic plurals); double pluralization (by applying the above two); and through reduplication (see details on Amharic plural formation in Baye (2000) and Leslau (2000)). As shown in (3) above, all the plural forms are derived from the masculine singular forms. If one wants to refer to a group of females, the analogical formations (with asterisk) exhibit possible structures to be used in the

language. However, the pragmatics, which relies mainly on societal perception, prohibits these analogical formations of pluralizing the feminine nouns. The data also proves that whereas the feminine is consistently marked by the *-t* suffix, the masculine is either unmarked or marked by internal vowel change. In Arbore, the feminine singulative is the second derived form from the male singulative as in *hokkól* ‘lame (people)’ > *hokkol-an* ‘a lame male’ > *hokkol-an-té* ‘a lame female’; *gelebá* ‘Dhaasanech’ > *geleba-n* ‘male Dhaasanech’ > *geleba-n-té* ‘a female Dhaasanech’, etc. (Mous, nd).

In Amharic, every noun must belong to either of the two gender classes: masculine or feminine. Even if the subject noun is inanimate and non-living (obviously without any biological gender), the verb should license its subject in person, number and gender. This includes derived nominals from verbs. Infinitival nominals (verbal nouns), for instance, assume masculine features as in (4) below:

- (4)   mä-ayät mä-amän   nä-w                   ‘(HE) Seeing is believing.’  
           INF-see INF-believe COP-3MS  
           \*mä-ayät mä-amän na-t
- mä-mmar yi- as-käbr-all               ‘(HE) Learning makes one respected.’  
           INF-learn 3MS-CAUS-respect-AUX  
           \*mämar ti-as-käbr-all-ätfʃ
- mä-nor bä-agär   nä-w                   ‘(HE) Living is better in one’s country.’  
           INF-live P-country COP-3MS  
           \*mänor bä-agär nat

As shown in the data, the derived nominals are all perceived and grammatically specified as 3MS nouns (see the AGR morphemes). The sentences with the asterisk where the verbs are inflected for the 3FS *-t* are analogically possible to be used. However, they are unacceptable purely for pragmatic reasons.

In a similar way, manner nominals also assume the masculine gender and hence agree with masculine AGR markers in the verbs. Compare the following examples:



- (5) alläbabäs -wa t'iru n-äw  
 way of dressing-3FS good COP-3MS  
 'Her way of (HE) dressing is good.'  
 \*alläbabäs-wa t'iru n-at
- annägagär -wa däss yi-l-all  
 way of speaking-3FS likable 3MS-say-AUX  
 'Her way of (HE) speaking is likable.'  
 \*annägagär-wa däss ti-lall-ät'fj
- at't'änan-at'fj'äw zämänawi hon-ä  
 'way of studying-3PL modern become-3MS  
 'Their way of (HE) studying has become modern.'  
 \*at't'änan-at'fj'äw zämänawi hon-ät'fj

Abstract nominals, like the above infinitival and manner nominals, assume masculine gender. In the first two examples below, the abstract nominals *lidzinnät* 'childhood' and *t'eninnät* 'health' appear as subjects. In the third example, *aläk'innät* 'chiefdom', appears as object. The AGR morphemes in all the verbs license the abstract nominals as 3MS.

- (6) lidz-innät tämällis-o a-y-mät'-a-mm  
 child-ABS come back-3MS NEG-3MS-come-3MS-NEG  
 '(HE) Childhood does not come back.'  
 \*lidzinnät tämällisa atmät'amm
- t'en-innät wanna-w habt n-äw  
 be healthy-ABS main-3MS wealth COP-3MS  
 '(HE) Health is the main wealth.'  
 \*t'eninnät wanna-wa habt n-at
- issu aläkinnät-u-n a- y-t'äl-aw-imm  
 he chiefdom-3MS-ACC NEG-3MS-hate-3MS-NEG  
 'He does not hate his (HE) chiefdom.'  
 \*issu aläkinnät-u-n a-y-t'äl-at-imm

In Amharic imperative forms, the 2MS imperative is the basic form for both 2FS and 2PL imperative forms. As shown in (7) below, whereas the latter constantly show the imperative morphemes, the former either slightly changes in form or never changes.

(7)	Verb stem	Imperative			Gloss
		2MS	2FS	2PL	
	täkkos-	täkkus!	täkkus-i (s>ʃ/-i)	täkkus-u	shoot!
	hed-	hid!	hid-i! (d>ɖʒ/-i)	hid-u!	go!
	yaz-	yaz!	yaz-i! (z>ʒ/-i)	yaz-u!	hold/catch!
	las-	las!	las-i! (s>ʃ/-i)	las-u!	lick!
	sät't'-	sit'!	sit'-i! (t'>ʃ'/-i)	sit'-u!	give!
	sab-	sab!	sab-i!	sab-u!	pull!
	näggär-	nigär-	nigär-i	nigär-u!	tell!

The 3MS is the basic form in many more instances. In dictionaries where Amharic appears either as the target or the source language, verbs are entered in the 3MS form as lemmas. In the following examples, the suffixes *-a/-ä* in the perfect are 3MS AGR markers which make the masculine gender more prominent than the 3FS or 3PL.

(8)	Word	Dictionary meaning	Actual meaning
	mät't'-a	come	He came.
	bäll-a	eat	He ate.
	arräs-ä	plough	He ploughed.
	fälläg-ä	search	He searched.
	tämar-ä	learn	He learned.
	k'orät't'äm-ä	grind	He ground.

The 3MS is the point of departure to teach Amharic grammar and hence gender asymmetry is observed in pedagogical methodology. Compare the following imperfect forms of verbs:

(9)	Word	Dictionary meaning	Actual meaning
	yi-mät't'-all	(will) come	He (will) come(s).
	yi-bäll-all	(will) eat	He (will) eat(s).
	yi-ars-all	(will) plough	He (will) plough(s).
	yi-fällig-all	(will) search	He (will) search(s).

yi-mmar-all	(will) learn	He (will) learn(s).
yi-k'orät't'im-all	(will) grind	He (will) grind(s).

In the following three examples, the subjects of the embedded verbs are *agäritu* 'the country', *tämariwotſf* 'students' and *täsibo* 'typhoid', respectively. The main verbs *yätawwäk'all*, *yämslall* and *yätammänall* underlyingly assume an NP parallel to the English pleonastic 'it' or at the level of surface structure, take the subordinate clauses *agäritu idgät indäasayyätſf* '... that the country showed development', *tämariwotſf wädä kifil yägäbbu* '... that students entered class', and *täsibo bizu hizb indä-gäddälä* '... that typhoid killed many people' as subjects licensed by the masculine gender and hence substitutable only by the 3MS 'he'.

- (10) agar-itu idgät indä-as-ayy-ätſf yi -tt-awwäk'-all  
 the country (F) development that-PASS-show-3FS 3MS-PASS-know-AUX  
 '(HE) It is known that the country showed development.'

tämari-wotſf wädä kifil yä-gäbb-u yi- mäsl-all  
 student-PL to class that-enter-3PL 3MS-seem-AUX  
 '(HE) It seems that the students entered class.'

täsibo bizu hizb indä-gäddäl-ä yi- tt- ammän-all  
 typhoid many people as-kill-3MS 3MS-PASS-believe-AUX  
 '(HE) It is believed that typhoid kill many people.'

In Amharic, definiteness is marked. As shown in (11), the masculine definite marker is *-u/-w* and the feminine definite marker is *-itu* which combines together the feminine marker *-it* and the masculine definite marker *-u*. Plural nouns take the masculine definite marker *-u*. Hence, such nouns, though they can inherently be feminine or neuter, are all structurally presented as masculine.

- |      |           |           |                |             |
|------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-------------|
| (11) | Masculine |           | Feminine       |             |
|      | Singular  | mäkina-w  | 'the car'      | mäkina-ytu  |
|      |           | bet-u     | 'the house'    | bet-itu     |
|      |           | wonbär-u  | 'the chair'    | wonbär-itu  |
|      |           | mängäd-u  | 'the road'     | mängäd-itu  |
|      |           | bandira-w | 'the flag'     | bandira-ytu |
|      |           | gibbi-w   | 'the compound' | gibbi-ytu   |

Plural	mäkina-wotʃtʃ-u	‘the (HE) cars’	*mäkina-otʃtʃ-it-u
	bet-otʃtʃ-u	‘the (HE) houses’	*bet-otʃtʃ-it-u
	wonbär-otʃtʃ-u	‘the (HE) chairs’	*wonbär-otʃtʃ-it-u
	mängäd-otʃtʃ-u	‘the (HE) road’	*mängäd-otʃtʃ-it-u
	bandira-wotʃtʃ-u	‘the (HE) flags’	*bandira-wotʃtʃ-it-u
	gibbi-wotʃtʃ-u	‘the (HE) compounds’	*gibbi-wotʃtʃ-it-u

Semantically, the choice of definite markers carry an additional interpretation connected with size: the masculine definite markers convey bigness (augmentative) and the feminine definite markers smallness (diminutive). In (11), whereas those nouns in the first column (masculine definite) are perceived as big, wide and long, the feminine counterparts in the second column are perceived as small, narrow and short in size. The property of Amharic, as one of the Afro-Asiatic languages, confirms Diakonoff’s (1988) remark that female-diminution association is a common phenomenon in Afro-Asiatic languages. Compare a few more examples below on gender and size relationship.

(12)	gizuf-u	tärara		*gizuf-itu tärara
	giant-3MS.DEF	mountain		‘the (SHE) giant mountain’
		‘the (HE) giant mountain’		
	käbbad-u	ʃäkim		*käbbad-itu ʃäkim
	heavy-3MS.DEF	load		‘the (SHE) heavy load’
		‘the (HE) heavy load’		
	bizzu-w	hizb		*bizzu-itu hizb
	big amount	3MS.DEF crowd		‘the (SHE) big crowd’
		‘the (HE) big crowd’		

In example (13), there is gender incompatibility between 3MS masculine nouns and 3FS feminine grammar. Such sentences with masculine subjects corresponding to feminine agreement markers are grammatically unacceptable.

(13)	wändimm-e	gobäz	täinari	hon-ä	
	brother-POSS.1SG	clever	student	become-3FS	
		‘(SHE) My brother became a clever student.’			

Kasa bīzu māsīhaf anībb-all-ätftf  
 Kasa many books read-Aux-3FS  
 '(SHE) Kasa has read many books.'

Kasa! antftfi nä-j inde yä-t'ärr-af-ijj  
 Kasa! You.2FS COP-2FS EMPH REL-call-2FS-1SG  
 '(SHE) Kasa! is it you who called me?'

However, feminizing the masculine, as in the above constructions, is acceptable as expressions of endearment, admiration and coaxing to a male person (see also Leslau, 2000).

### Gender asymmetry in common nouns

One of the areas to examine gender (a)symmetry in languages are common nouns that are neither feminine nor masculine. According to Corbett (1991), in languages such as Maasai, the feminine is used both when a female is involved and when the sex of a person involved is unknown. In Dama, one of the Khoisan languages of Namibia, mixed group of people are addressed in feminine pronouns.<sup>7</sup> In the same way, there are feminine-biased languages in Venezuela and Columbia (Corbett, 1991). In these languages, words such as 'people', 'they' and 'one' that have indefinite reference are addressed in the feminine. In the language Goajiro, spoken in South America, the male reference is made for masculine humans, sun and thumb; or all remaining nouns, the female gender is used with a wide array of occurrences.

In most Ethiopian languages, there is no as such 'neuter gender' which specifically marks the gender of 'neuter nouns'. Nouns must be gender marked either feminine or masculine. In Amharic, the masculine gender is used as the default gender in the absence of any gender opposition indicated. The same is true, for instance, in Dime (Mulugeta, 2008), Zay (Meyer, 2001) and a number of Gurage languages including Muher (Meyer, fc). In Kambaata, even

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<sup>7</sup> In Gorowa, a South Cushitic language, bodily defects such as *taampaa* 'blind person', *daktani* 'fool', etc. and sterility such as *karaama* 'castrated animal', *puq'uli* 'bull without testicles', etc. are grammatically feminine (Kießling, 2000). In Alagawa, (South Cushitic) *seree'a* 'buffalo', and *karama* 'castrated bull', with male connotations, are feminine (Mous, nd). The same author mentioned that, in Iraqw (South Cushitic), feminine is the default gender (Mous, 1993)

the naturally female living things *sa'-a* 'cow' and *meent-u* 'women' are grammatically masculine (Treis, 2008). The same property holds for Chaha, a South Ethio-Semitic language (Maria Bulakh, p.c.). In Afaan Oromo too, we observe a polarity of natural and grammatical genders: the word for 'cow', a biologically feminine animal, can be marked for and agree both as feminine and as masculine as in *sa'a kana* 'this cow (F)' and *sa'ati tana* 'this cow (M)'. It is interesting to see 'cow' as a masculine noun widespread in Cushitic including Beja where *fā* 'cow (M)' agrees with the article, verbs and adjectives in the masculine (Roper, 1928). In the western dialect of Afaan Oromo, the use of feminine gender is restricted to females and to express diminutive and pejorative meanings (Clammonds 1999 – mentioned in Mous (nd)). On the other hand, in Arbore and Rendille, plural nouns that end in *o* have a feminine base (Mous, nd). According to Hayward (1992), the feminine is the default gender in Afar.

In Amharic, *sāw* refers to 'man/person' and *set* refers to 'female/woman'. Morphologically, the two words seem to be derived from the same root *sā-*. The suffix *-w* is a masculine marker as in *nāggār-ā-w* 'He told him.', *nā-w* 'he is.' etc. and *-t* is the feminine marker as in *nāggār-ā-at* 'He told her.', *nā-at* 'She is.', etc. As in the following examples, *sāw* 'man' which originally refers to a non-specific human being and hence generic.

- (14) and *sāw māt't'-a*  
 one person come.PS-3MS  
 'A (HE) person came.'

\*and *sāw māt't'-at*(tʃ (3FS)

*sāw bā-k'wank'w a kā-insisat yi-lläyy-all*  
 man by-language from-animals 3MS-differ-AUX  
 '(HE) Man differs from animals by language.'

\**sāw bā-k'wank'w a kā-insisat ti-lläyy-all-ät*(tʃ (3FS)

*īyyä-and-and-u sāw hulätt hulätt tʃiggijñ mätkäl all- äbb- ät*  
 each-one-one-3MS.DEF person two two seedling to plant AUX-MAL-3MS  
 '(HE) Each one has to plant two seedlings each.'

\**īyyä-and-and-wa sāw hulät hulät tʃiggijñ mätkäl all-äbb-at* (3FS)

manniḥḥa-w-imm säw wädä-bet li-gäb-a yi-tf'il-all  
 everyone-3MS-FOC man to-house COND-3MS 3MS-can-AUX  
 '(HE) Everyone is able to enter to a house.'

\*manniḥḥa-wa-mm säw säw wädä-bet li-tt-gäb-a ti-tf'il-all-ät{tʃ} (3FS)

In the above sentences, *säw* 'man/person' refers to both feminine and masculine human beings. However, the agreement markers in the verbs are always in the masculine. Hence, the sentences with the asterisks where AGR elements license feminine nouns are all unacceptable. First, the word *säw* which refers to 'all human beings' has a wider semantic range than *set* which refers only to 'woman'. In other words, the latter is the subordinate of the former. Secondly, as in constructions such as *säw-ḥyye* 'a man' vs. *set-ḥyyo* 'a woman', *lä-säw mot annäs-ä-w* lit. 'Death is the minimum punishment for Man.', *säw yassiball igzi'abḥer yḥäs's'imall* 'Man plans, God accomplishes.', the word *säw* seems to have narrowed its meaning toward a male reference.

In the following interrogative pronouns, the speaker alludes to the unknown referent with the 3MS. Using the 3FS in such constructions presupposes the knowledge of the speaker about the gender of the reference.

- |      |   |   |
|------|---|---|
| (15) | mann n-äw<br>who COP-3MS<br>'Who is (HE) it?'                                   | yä-mann n-äw<br>of-who COP-3MS<br>'Whose is (HE) it?'                             |
|      | ityop'iyawi mann n-äw<br>Ethiopian (M.) who COP-3MS<br>'Who is (HE) Ethiopian?' | mann mät't'-a<br>who come.PS-3MS<br>'Who (HE) came?'                              |
|      | min yi-ddärräg-all<br>what 3MS-do.PASS-AUX<br>'What is (HE) done?'              | min tä-wälläd-ä<br>what PASS-give birth.PS-3MS<br>'What (HE) was given birth to?' |

In (16), *and-äḥḥa yä-mmi-wät'a tämari* 'a student who stands first' in the first sentence, and *wät't'atu t'awlidd* 'the young generation' in the second sentence are both 3MS subject NPs as reflected by the AGR markers. Of course, both NPs encompass female students and female youth.

- (16) and-äŋŋa yä-mm- yi-wot'-a tämari yi- ŋŋälläm-all  
 one-ADJ REL-IMPER-3MS-stand-3MS student 3MS-reward-AUX  
 'A (HE) student who stands first will be rewarded.'

wät't'at-u tiwliidd yä- agar täräkkab-i n-äw  
 young-3MS generation of-country receiver COP-3MS  
 'The (HE) young generation is the receiver of a country.'

The following indefinite pronouns, derived from the interrogative pronouns with the enclitic *-mm*, also appear as 3MS as seen by the concord relation in the verb:

- (17) mannimm al-mät't'-a-mm  
 nobody NEG-come-3MS-NEG  
 '(HE) Nobody came.'

\*mannimm al-mät't'-at[ɬ]-imm (3FS)

minimm al-tä-gäŋŋ-ä-mm  
 nothing NEG-PASS-find-3MS-NEG  
 '(HE) Nothing was found.'

\*minimm al-tä-gäŋŋ-ät[ɬ]-imm (3FS)

hullu-mm lidz woladz-u-n mä-akbär alläbb-ät  
 all-FOC child parent-3MS.POSS-DEF INF-respect should-3MS  
 'All (HE) child should respect his parents.'

\*hullum lidz wäladzwan makbär alläbbat (3FS)

In the above sentences, the bare interrogative pronouns refer to any human being ('males' or 'females'). However, the verbs must agree in person, number and gender specifically with a male human being and hence the sentences with the asterisks are not possible.

Generic or unspecified NPs favour the masculine gender. In the first example below, the notice is announced to *säw* 'man' which under normal circumstances refers to any person including females. In the second example, the head noun of the relative construction *yädäkkämäw* 'one (he) who gets tired' is *abal* 'member', a noun referring to both genders. As can be seen in the data, both *säw* and *abal* agree with the verbs in the 3MS. In the third example,



*həzb* 'crowd' which also includes a crowd of people including females takes the masculine definite marker -u. In the fourth example, though the head noun is not overtly mentioned, form the AGR marker, it can potentially be filled with a masculine noun such as *säw* 'man/person', *abal* 'member', *g#läsäb* 'individual', etc., all perceived as masculine. Hence, any appearance of feminine agreement inflections in the verbs with the common/generic nouns is grammatically well-formed but pragmatically unacceptable.

(18)

lä-sira ma-amälkäät yä-mm-yi-fällig säw hullu nägä mä-mt'at yi-tʃil-all  
 for-work to-apply REL-IMPER-3MS-want person all tomorrow to-come 3MS-can-AUX  
 'Anyone who wants to apply for a job can come tomorrow.'

yä-däkkäm-äw abal m-aräf yi-tʃil-all  
 REL-gets tired-3MS member INF-take rest 3MS-can-AUX  
 'Anybody who gets tired can take rest.'

hizb-u hullu alämu-n amasäggän-ä-w  
 people-3MS.DEF all Alemu-ACC thank-3MS.SUB-3MS.OBJ  
 'All people thanked Alemu.'

bet lä-m-agn-ät yä-mm-yi-fällig zarewunu yi-mmäzgeb  
 house COMP-INF-get-INF REL-IMPER-3MS-want just today 3MS.JUSS-register  
 'He who wants to get a house can register just today.'

The examples in (19) below show the widely accepted pattern of conjoined nouns in the order male-before-female, which depicts the prominence of males over females among the Amhara:

- |      |                        |                         |                          |
|------|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| (19) | bal-inna mist          | *mist-inna bal          | 'husband and wife'       |
|      | Addam-inna Hewan       | *Hewan-inna Addam       | 'Adam and Eve'           |
|      | Abraham-inna Sara      | *sara-inna Abraham      | 'Abraham and Sara'       |
|      | nigusu-inna nigist-itu | *nigist-itu-inna nigusu | 'the king and the queen' |

In other conjoined nouns such as *wond#inna #i#i* 'brother and sister', *wond#inna set* 'male and female', etc., the reverse order is also possible. However, it is difficult to find examples illustrating the order female-before-male as the exclusively accepted norm in Amharic.

**Gender asymmetry in different semantic fields**

In Amharic, nouns that are naturally male or female assume their respective masculine and feminine gender inflections in the verb. There are however numerous instances where nouns are assigned either masculine or feminine gender without exhibiting any natural sex. Physical objects which are naturally genderless assume the masculine gender as shown below.

(20)	mängäd	mängäd-u      räzzäm-ä road-3MS.DEF be lengthy.PS-3MS 'The (HE) road became longer.'
	dänn	dänn-u      tä-tj' äfätj'tj' äf-ä forest-3MS.DEF PASS-clear.PS-3MS 'The (HE) forest is cleared.'
	wik'iyanos	säffi-w wuk'iyanos PACIFIC n-äw wide-3MS.DEF ocean pacific COP-3MS 'The widest (HE) ocean is pacific.'
	tärara	ya tärara tällik' n-äw that mountain big COP-3MS 'That (HE) mountain is big.'
	märet	märet tä-wäddäd-ä land PASS-expensive.PS-3MS '(HE) Land plot became expensive.'

If a noun such as *mängäd*, *dänn*, etc. should take the feminine gender, it is either marked or the speaker wants to talk about a tiny portion of 'road', 'forest', etc. Amharic uses an evasive he-form where HE is used replacing the neuter singular. Hence, the use of 'male' items in sex-neutral contexts is extremely common in the language.

In Amharic, every noun must be specified for either feminine or masculine genders in the verb. In the following examples, abstract concepts take the masculine gender. The constructions with the asterisks that appear with feminine agreement markers would be possible except for the fact that they are pragmatically unacceptable.

- (21) fik'ir                      fik'ir yiz- o- jn- all  
 love catch-3MS-1SG-AUX  
 Lit. '(HE) Love has caught me.'
- \*fik'ir yi-za-jn-all-ät[ʃ] (3FS)  
 Lit. '(SHE) Love has caught me.'
- mot a- yi- k'är- imm  
 death NEG-3MS-avoidable-NEG  
 '(HE) Death is unavoidable.'
- \*mot al-ti-k'är-imm (3FS)  
 '(SHE) Death is unavoidable.'
- higg-u                      tä- t'as- ä  
 law-3MS.DEF. PASS-violate.PS-3MS  
 'The (HE) law is violated.'
- \*hig-wa tä-t'as-ät[ʃ] (3FS)  
 'The (SHE) law is violated.'
- sim-ih                      mann n-äw  
 name-2MS.POSS what COP-3MS  
 'What is (HE) your name?'
- \*sim-ij mann n-at (3FS)  
 'What is your (SHE) name?'

In the following examples, concrete concepts take the masculine AGR marker –ä/-a in the perfect and y(i)- in the imperfect, both with masculine representation. The sentences with asterisk are grammatically well-formed but unacceptable from the pragmatic point of view.

- (22) rat                      rat amällät' -ä-jn  
 dinner miss-3SG-1SG  
 Lit. 'The (HE) dinner escaped me.'
- \*rat amällät' -ät[ʃ]-jn  
 'I missed (SHE) dinner.'

anbät'a	anbät'a säbl-u-n bäll-a-w locust crop-DEF-ACC-eat-3MS-3MS.OBJ '(HE) Locust ate the crop.'  *anbät't'a säbl-u-n ball-ät'f-iw '(SHE) Locust ate the grain.'
wiha	wiha yi-t't'ät't'-all water 3MS-drink-AUX '(HE) Water is drinkable.'  *wuha ti-t't'ät't'-all-ät'f '(SHE) Water is drinkable.'

With fauna, big, powerful and ferocious animals are addressed as males. Should the sentences in the asterisks be acceptable, the nouns must be marked with the feminine definite marker *-itu* or take the specifier set 'female'.

(23) anbässa	anbässa hayläjña n-äw lion powerful COP-3MS '(HE) Lion is powerful.'  *anbässa hayläjña nat '(SHE) Lion is powerful.'
zändo	zändo märzäjña n-äw python poisonous COP-3MS '(HE) Python is poisonous.'  *zändo märzäjña nat '(SHE) Python is poisonous.'
zihon	zihon gwadäjña yi-hon-all elephant friend 3MS-become-AUX '(HE) Elephant can become a friend.'  * zihon gwadäjña ti-hon-all-ät'f '(SHE) Elephant can be a friend.'

In some instances, the feminine marker is attached to the name of small

animals irrespective of their biological gender as in *tfärär-it* ‘the (SHE) spider’, *#ñfilal-it* ‘the (SHE) lizard’, *ayt'-it* ‘the (SHE) rat’, *wäf-it* ‘the (SHE) bird’, etc.

Like many other naturally genderless entities, plant species, especially the big ones, agree in person, number and gender with the 3MS.

- (24)    wanza                      wanza                      wudd                      hon-ä  
    Cordia africana expensive become-3MS  
    ‘(HE) Cordia africana becomes expensive.’
- \*wanza wudd hon-ätʃʃ  
    ‘(SHE) Cordia africana becomes expensive.’
- bahr-zaf                      bahr-zaf käsäl                      yi-hon-all  
    eucalyptus tree coal 3MS-be-AUX  
    ‘(HE) Eucalyptus can become coal.’
- \*bahr-zaf käsäl ti-hon-all-ätʃʃ  
    ‘(SHE) Eucalyptus can become coal.’

Similarly, fruits such as *bʃtukan* ‘orange’, *lomi* ‘lemon’, *tʃ#ngo* ‘an apple-like fruit’, etc. assume the masculine gender as in *bʃtukan täwäddäd-ä* ‘(HE) orange became expensive.’, *#ne lomi-w-#n mät't'ät'-hu-t* ‘I sucked the (HE) lemon.’ and *tʃ#ngo #yyä-t'äff-a yä-all-ä fʃre n-äw* ‘(HE) apple-like is a fruit which is no more found in abundance.’

Body parts have no biological gender. However, they are represented by grammatical inflections in verbs. Unless a speaker wants to talk about a single hair follicle or one single finger or a piece of liver, intestine, nail, etc. or the tiny navel, all body parts assume the masculine gender in Amharic.

- (25)  
 gubbät                      gubbät bizu däm all-äw  
    liver a lot of blood have-3MS  
    ‘(HE) Liver contains a lot of blood.’

däm	däm-at[ɸjāw k'ɔʃʃäʃ-ä bood-3PL get dirty.PS-3MS 'Their (HE) blood got dirty.'
ayn	ayn-wa k'all-a eye-3FS become red.PS-3MS '(HE) her eye became red.'
s'ägur	s'ägur-e-n                      tä-k'orrät'-hu-t hair-1SG.POSS-ACC PASS-cut-1SG-3MS.OBJ 'I got my (HE) hair cut.'

As shown below, color terms are generally masculine unless they modify small objects in size and hence are in the feminine gender. Compare the examples below:

(26)	t'ik'ur	t'ik'ur yä- mm-i-wodd-äw	k'äläm n-äw
		black REL-IMPER-1SG-like-3MS.OBJ	color COP-3MS
		'(HE) Black is the color I like.'	
	k'äyy	k'äyy yä-adäga milkkit n-äw	
		red of-danger mark	COP-3MS
		'(HE) Red is a mark of danger.'	
	sämayawi	sämayawi yä-sämay mälk all-äw	
		blue of-sky color has-3MS	
		'Blue has the color of sky.'	

All days of the week take masculine agreement. Any occurrence in the feminine form results in unacceptable utterances. Compare the examples in (27) below.

(27)	säɲɲo	säɲɲo adkami k'an n-äw	*säɲɲo adkami k'an nat
		Monday tiresome day COP-3MS	
		'(HE) Monday is a tiresome day.'	
	k'idame	k'idame yä-gäbäya kän n-äw	*k'idame ye-gäbäya k'an n-at
		Saturday of market day COP-3MS	
		'(HE) Saturday is a market day.'	



s'ähay s'ähay wot't'-a  
 sun rise.PS-3MS  
 '(HE) Sun rose.'

s'ähay wot't'-at[ɬ]  
 sun rise.PS-3FS  
 '(SHE) Sun rose.'

As shown in the examples above, the nouns *aläm*, *agär* and *s'ähay* can appear in both the masculine and feminine genders. Exceptionally, *s'ähay* 'sun' most often takes the feminine gender. In *s'ähay wät't'-a* '(HE) Sun rises.' *s'ähay* does not implicate the actual, astronomical object but the striking sunlight it emits at dawn. In few instances astronomical concepts like *sämay* 'sky' only appear in the masculine most likely because 'sky' is perceived as 'massive' in its size as in *sämay-u t'ärr-a* 'The (HE) sky became clear.'

On the other hand, as shown in (29) below, *märet* and *tʃ'äräk'a* assume only the feminine gender.

- |      |           |  |                    |
|------|-----------|--|--------------------|
| (29) | midir     | midir ti-zor-all-ät[ɬ]<br>earth 3FS-rotate-aux-3FS<br>'(SHE) Earth rotates.' | * midir yi-zor-all |
|      | tʃ'äräk'a | tʃ'äräk'a tä-ayy-ät[ɬ]<br>moon pass-see-3FS<br>'(SHE) Moon is seen.'         | *tʃ'äräk'a tayy-ä  |

Close observation shows us that Ethiopian culture perceives some heavenly bodies as gigantic and others as small in size. Thus, as compared to *sämay* 'sky' (always masculine), *midir* 'earth', *tʃ'äräk'a* 'moon' and *s'ähay* 'sun' are perceived as 'too small' to be referred to in the masculine. It is also worth mentioning that in Amharic myth, the sky is a heavenly body where God lives.

### **Gender asymmetries in personal names**

We learn from sociolinguistics that language and society are inseparable and influence each other. The grammatical and sociolinguistic description of personal names is one of the variables worth considering to understand the inter-influence between language and society. Amharic personal names that



are derived from verbs, nouns and adjectives depict gender distinction and their meanings clearly show gender asymmetry (for details on Amharic personal onomastics, see Zelealem (2005)). The description of such names reveals the social 'importance' of males and the social 'unimportance' of females.

In (30) below, representative examples of names that have a symmetrical distribution for both genders are given. As clearly seen, the corresponding female and male names share the same base form. The difference lies only in the gender marker suffixes. Whereas the male names are marked masculine by the morphemes *-ä* and *-u*, the female names are marked feminine by *-ät/f*, *-wa* and *-it*.

(30)	käbbäd-ä vs. käbbäd-ät/f	'(S)he became heavy.'
	adan-ä vs. adan-ät/f	'(S)he healed.'
	täwab-ä vs. täwab-ät/f	'(S)he became pretty.'
	fälläk'-ä vs. fälläk'-ät/f	'(S)he sparkled.'
	fät't'an-ä vs. fät't'an-ät/f	'(S)he hastened'
	lämläm-u vs. lämläm-itu	'the verdant'
	ðimbär-u vs. ðimbär-wa	'his boundary/her boundary'

Common nouns that are not inflected for gender are widely used as personal names. The following list of names show such genderless names that can be given to both males and females symmetrically.

(31)	s'ägga 'grace'	birihan 'light'	abyot 'revolution'
	täsfä 'hope'	s'ahay 'sun'	sälam 'peace'
	aläm 'world'	beza 'ransom'	sisay 'treasure'

However, it is not always the case that neutral names like in (31) are used equally for both genders. In some cases, a name that is not gender-marked can be reserved by the society for either of the two sexes. In that case, what matters a great deal in the determination of eligibility as a male or female name is not its morphological composition but the connotation embodied in the nouns when transferred to proper names. The gender-neutral names below are exclusively given to males:

(32)	mäk <sup>w</sup> riya	‘pride maker’	bälay	‘on top’
	dʒägne	‘hero’	gobäze	‘my brave’
	dämmällaʃ	‘retaliator’	aʃʃännafi	‘winner’
	yäʃiwas	‘bale of thousands’	mulukʻän	‘whole day’
	daɲna	‘judge’	aʃmiro	‘mind’
	täfäri	‘one who is ferocious’	azzaʒ	‘chief’

This shows the societal conception of male over female in which the former is associated with pride, heroism, winning, bravery, chiefdom, etc.<sup>8</sup> Names such as *anbässa* ‘lion’, *näbr-o* ‘leopard (vocative)’, *goff-u* ‘the buffalo’, *gissʻlla* ‘cheetah’, *awraris* ‘rhinoceros’, etc. are exclusively given to males on the principle that these animals are felt to be kings of the forest. From flora, the most respected and giant ones are used as male names. This includes *warka* ‘Ficus vasta’, *sʻid* ‘juniper’, *zigba* ‘cedar tree’, *wanza* ‘Cordia africana’, etc. Flowering and climbing plants such as *sʻigeräda* ‘rose’, *haräg* ‘climber’, *woyn-haräg* ‘vine climber’ that are conceived as beautiful are given to females as personal names.

It is a commonplace in Amharic that bestowal of female names is ameliorative in the sense that these names are associated with beauty, faith, elegance, peace, fruitiness, sweetness, endurance, etc. The following nouns show no gender specification but are exclusively used as female names:

(33)	tiringo ‘a kind of apple’	ʃänkore ‘my sugar-cane’
	birtukan ‘orange’	abäba ‘flower’
	mäskäräm ‘September’	mare ‘my honey’
	zimmäta ‘silence’	sälam ‘peace’
	tigist ‘endurance’	tizzäta ‘memory’

Unlike (30) where male and female names have correspondingly symmetrical distribution, names like the following that are explicitly marked for feminine gender are used only as female names without corresponding names for the male counterparts.

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<sup>8</sup> In Meʻen, a Nilo-Saharan language, the word *macʻi* has two meanings: ‘brave’ and ‘man’ (data from Will, 1989).

- (34) fälläguḥ ‘they wanted you (F).’  
 mant’ägboḥ ‘who would dare to be bored of you (F)’  
 jimatf’af ‘thousand for your (F) dowry’  
 agäpnähuḥ ‘I got you (F).’  
 abozzanät[tf] ‘She made one idle.’

In a similar vein, it is very common in the Amharic naming tradition that names which are marked for the masculine gender are bestowed exclusively as male names. Compare the list in (35) below.

- |      |  |                                       |
|------|--|---------------------------------------|
| (35) | jifärraw ‘thousands are afraid of him.’    | haylu ‘his force’                     |
|      | dämīssat[tf]äw ‘destroy them’              | mängistu ‘his government’             |
|      | märra ‘he led’                             | bälat[tf]äw ‘hit them’!               |
|      | addämä ‘he revolted’                       | gizat[tf]äw ‘you rule them!’          |
|      | mannyazzizäwall ‘who dare to command him?’ | yifräd ‘let him judge’                |
|      | säyf-u ‘the (M) sword’                     | indä-al-ä-w ‘as he would<br>wish/say’ |

The above list of names bestowed upon males (see also example 32 above) is linked to augmentation, bravery, courage, determination, wisdom, authority, etc. The grammar of the language in principle would allow speakers to substitute the masculine gender markers by the feminine and give corresponding names to females. However, the pragmatic norms do not allow such names to be bestowed upon females, if this occurs, it is considered strange.

- |      |   |   |
|------|---|---|
| (36) | *ji-färr-at ‘thousands are afraid of her.’    | *hayl-wa ‘his force’                          |
|      | *dämīss-at[tf]äw ‘destroy them’               | *mängist-wa ‘her government’                  |
|      | *märr-at[tf] ‘she led’                        | *bä-y-at[tf]äw ‘hit them’                     |
|      | *addäm-ät[tf] ‘she revolted’                  | *giz-i-at[tf]äw ‘you rule them’               |
|      | *man-y-aziz-at-all ‘who dare to command her?’ | *ti-fräd ‘let her judge’                      |
|      | *säyf-itu ‘the (F) sword’                     | *indä-al-ät[tf]-iw ‘as she would<br>wish/say’ |

To find a feminine counterpart for every masculine personal name is not easy in Amharic personal nomenclature. This indicates the discrepancy between

linguistic rules that generate well-formed utterances and extra-linguistic factors, or in this case, the perception of speakers that makes functional restrictions and thus influences the grammar.

Full names in Amharic refer to the name bearer plus the name of the father and if need be the name of grandfather, one of the manifestations of a patriarchal society. Amharic full names exhibit the syntactic pattern "child, then father". Whichever word class the child's name is derived from, the relationship between the child's and the father's names is like any other NP in the language, with the modifier appears preceding the modified. In that case, a father of ten has the chance to be described ten times by his children's name(s) (male and female). According to Levi-Strauss (1966), in naming, either the name giver or the name receiver is signified. When we closely observe the Amharic "child, then father" names, male names show gender compatibility between the name bearer (male child) and his father ( $CHILD_{MASCULINE} + FATHER_{MASCULINE}$ ). On the other hand, female names show gender incompatibility between the name bearer (female child) and her father ( $CHILD_{FEMININE} + FATHER_{MASCULINE}$ ). Compare the following examples in which names of children are marked either for 3FS or 3MS whereas names of fathers are consistently marked for 3MS:

- |      |   |                               |
|------|---|-------------------------------|
| (37) | adan-ä sät't'-ä-jɲ<br>heal-3MS give-3MS-1SG   | ‘(HE) Setegn (HE) healed.’    |
|      | adan-ätʃ sät't'-ä-jɲ<br>heal-3FS give-3MS-1SG | *‘(HE) Setegn (SHE) healed.’  |
|      | abbäb-ä aläm-u<br>sprout-3MS world-3MS.DEF    | ‘(HE) Abebe (HE) sprouted.’   |
|      | abbäb-ätʃ aläm-u<br>sprout-3FS world-3MS.DEF  | *‘(HE) Alemu (SHE) sprouted.’ |
|      | märr-a nigus<br>lead-3MS king (M)             | ‘(HE) King (HE) led.’         |
|      | märr-atʃ nigus<br>lead-3FS king (M)           | *‘(HE) King (SHE) led.’       |

The metaphorical expression *wänd nat* lit. ‘She is male.’ or *wänd-a-wänd* ‘male-like actor’ to a female connotes admiration and attribution: she is not like all other females but courageous like males. On the other hand, if a male person is described as *set-a-set* ‘female-like actor’, the referent is perceived as delicate and cowardly. The *wänd* ‘male’-based names also symbolize the Amharic - speaking society as a male-dominant one. Examples are given below.

(38)	wänd-wäsän	lit. ‘top limit even among males’
	wänd-at’ir	lit. ‘strong defender even among males’
	wänd-awwīk	lit. ‘trouble-maker even among males’
	wänd-afraḥ	lit. ‘dismantler even of males’

It should in principle be possible to generate set ‘female’-based names as counterparts of the above wänd-based names. Nevertheless, such names are unacceptable in naming practices and hence the following names do not exist.

(39)	*set-wäsän	*set-awwīk
	*set-at’ir	*set-afraḥ

The linguistic rules of Amharic potentially generate names equally for both sexes. However, the social factors limit female names to a few semantic fields. Males seem to maintain high value as heroes, chiefs, judges; trustworthy, responsible and successful persons; celebrities; models, etc. in the society. The male names *ḥum(ät)* ‘high rank/position’ and *nīgus* ‘king’ and the female names *yäḥum-näf* lit. ‘You belong to a high-ranking man’ and *yänīgus-näf* ‘You belong to a King.’ clearly illustrate the stereotype of the society towards the two genders. In a society where females are looked down on, there are no female names connected to important political, economic and social activities. Females are well-known for their lenience, subservience, and taking care of their family.

### **Titles and others**

Professional and non-professional social titles show more evidence substantiating gender bias in Amharic. In some languages like Arabic and German, titles are gender-marked (Farwaneh, 2005). In Arabic, the suffix -a shows feminine as in *daktoor* vs. *daktoor-a*, ‘Doctor’, *zamiil* vs. *zamiil-a* ‘comrade’, *muhandis* vs. *muhandis-a* ‘engineer’, etc. In German, the suffix –

*in* distinguishes female from male titles as in *Ärzt* vs. *Ärzt-in* ‘physician’, *Lehrer* vs. *Lehrer-in* ‘teacher’, *Fahrer* vs. *Fahrer-in* ‘driver’, etc.

Professional titles in secular Ethiopia are given to both genders but, unlike Arabic and German, they are not gender-marked. During feudal Ethiopia (with a few remnants until today), ranks were given exclusively for males. This ranges from the lowest ranks such as *bäḥatta* ‘servant in a palace’, *aggafari* ‘messenger, reception observer’, *lik’ä-mäk<sup>v</sup>as* ‘entertainer by traditional music’ up to the highest such as *afä-nīgus* lit. ‘mouth of the King’, *liḥul* ras lit. ‘head prince’, *nīgus* ‘King’, etc. (see details on traditional titles in Arega (1967)). In the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the spiritual ranks *diyak’on* ‘deacon’, *k’es* ‘priest’, *p’ap’p’as* ‘pope’, etc. are bestowed exclusively upon males. In titles such as *mämhîr* vs. *mämhîr-t* ‘teacher’, *mänäkuse* vs. *mänäkus-it* ‘nun’, etc., the masculine is marked by a zero morpheme and the feminine by *-(i)t*. Still the masculine is identical with the base or citation form (same as in Arabic and German). *Ato* ‘Mr.’ is given as a title to a male adult irrespective of his qualification, marital status, occupation and so forth. On the other hand, when it comes to females, *W/ro* ‘Mrs.’ is given to a female who is married and *W/rit* ‘Miss’ to a female who is not yet married. In that regard, whereas both titles of females are binary reflecting both ‘femaleness’ and ‘marital status’, the male title is unitary expressing only ‘maleness’. In this connection, the Amharic terms resemble the English *Miss* vs. *Mrs.* and the forms of address in German *Fräulein* (obsolete) vs. *Frau*, in French *Mademoiselle* vs. *Madame*, in Spanish *Señorita* vs. *Señora* and in Italian *Signorina* vs. *Signora*.

Other compound terms such as the following are constructed based on ‘maleness’ or fields related to ‘maleness’. As shown in the third column, the female-based counterparts for the terms in the first column are grammatically perfect but socially unacceptable.

(40)	balä-abbat	'feudal lord'	*balä-innat
	abba-wärra	'master of house' <sup>9</sup>	(*)imma-wärra
	bal-indžera	'companion'	*mist-indžera

In the above examples, the term *balä-abbat* referring to a feudal lord in fact includes women feudal lords. *abba-wärra* is the master of the house who makes all the decisions in his homestead. It seems that the corresponding feminine term *imma-wärra* has emerged through time which also indicates that symmetrical terms are possibly introducible through analogy. In the same way, *wändä-lat't'e* 'bachelor' has now the equivalent feminine term *setä-lat't'e* 'spinster'. In the same vein, for *wänd-a-gäräd* 'male-looking female', the term *set-a-gäräd* has become a possible equivalent for 'female-looking male'.

In feudal Ethiopia, the term *yä-tf'in gäräd* lit. 'maid of thigh' (providing the feudal lord with all services including sex during campaigns) does not have an equivalent for the male counterpart. The main reason is that females were perceived first as incapable of leading any campaign on their own and secondly even if they go as campaign leaders, they would never be allowed to be accompanied by *yä-tf'in lole* 'servant of thigh' for the same purpose, at least publicly. The words *färrmut'a* 'prostitute' or *set-adari* 'whore' which are of course pejorative are associated only with females. The same is true of the word *galämota* 'widow/divorce' which describes only females. *fimaggille* denotes 'old male person' and *baltet* denotes 'old female person'. Connotatively, whereas *fimaggille* refers to a mediator which can potentially include female mediators, *baltet* (possibly derived from *bal tä-yet* which literally means 'husband from where') implies 'no more chance of getting a husband. In Amharic, the word *käbr-ä-näs'ihinna* [honour-cleanness] 'virginity' refers to females as it is only from females that sexual intercourse before marriage is unacceptable. The compound words *wänd lidž* [male child] 'boy' and *set lidž* [female child] 'girl' show a clear case of gender

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<sup>9</sup> It is a loanword from Afaan Oromo. For 'female master of house', Afaan Oromo has *hadä worra*.

asymmetry. Whereas the former compound word simply means ‘boy’, the latter (which also has a synonym *lidʒ-a-gäräd* ‘child-CONN-girl’) refers to a girl with zero sexual experience, one who has maintained her *kabr-änis’ähinna* ‘virginity’. This shows the social perception in which virginity is considered as of high value and is expected of females before marriage, whereas male virginity is undesired or even unexpected. The compound words *ars-o addar* ‘farmer’ and *arb#-o addär* ‘pastoralist’ refer to males as indicated by the 3MS gerundive suffix *-o*. These words however potentially describe not only male farmers and pastoralists, but also male and female farmers and pastoralists combined or possibly even farmers and pastoralists who are exclusively females.

In some dialects of Amharic, it is a commonplace to say *wälläd-ä-b-at* ‘He made use of her to give birth to a child.’ It is also common to say *as-räggäz-a-t* ‘He made her become pregnant.’ which sounds like the man did it alone or forcibly without the consent of the woman (see Zelealem (2007) for more on Amharic dialects). The word *yä-bet #mäbet* ‘housewife’ has the connotation: ‘She does not have any work outside the house’. In other instances such as *#nnat agär* ‘motherland’, *#nnat k<sup>w</sup>ank<sup>w</sup>a* ‘mother tongue’, etc., mothers are more favoured than fathers. Some nouns like *nägar-it* ‘large drum’, *säraw-it* ‘army’, *azur-it* ‘whirlpool’, etc. have only feminine forms with the *-it* suffix, with no masculine counterparts. Interestingly, these nouns nevertheless must take verbs in the masculine gender as in *nägar-it tä-goffäm-ä* ‘a large drum was beaten’, *säraw-it-u tämmäm-ä* ‘the army moved in huge numbers.’, *azur-it a-däkkäm-äjññ* ‘the whirlpool made me tired.’, etc.

Among the Amhara the identity of wives is subordinated to the identity of their husbands. This is observed by calling a woman ‘the wife of X’ or the ‘mother of (HE) Y’ or ‘the daughter of (HE) Z’ having in mind that she is better known by her husband's or son's or father's name. The following extracts from Merse-Hazen W/K’irk’os’s (1999:292) autobiography entitled ‘*Yäzämän Tarik Tēz#aye Käayyehut#inna Käsämmahut: 1896-1922*’ (The Memory of My Life: From What I Saw and What I Heard) show how women and men are identified in the society, which is also the case today:



**ወይዘሮ አዳነች ሀጎስ (የግቢ ሚኒስትሩ የደጃዝማች ወልደገብርኤል ሚስት) መስከረም ፭ ቀን ሞተው በአቃቂ መድኃኔ ዓለም ተቀበሩ።**

Wäyzäro Adanäff Hagos (Yägibbi Ministru Yädäççazmaፍ Wäldägäbrel Mist) Mäskäräm 5 K’än Motäw BäAk’ak’i Mädhane-Aläm Täk’äbbäru  
‘Mrs. Adanach Hagos (the wife of Dejazmach Woldegebriel, Minister of Palace) died on September 5 and was buried at Akaki Medhane-Alem church.’

**አለቃ ወልደያሬድ ዔለርዮን (የብሉይ ሊቅና የቅኔ መምህር) ጥር ፰ ቀን በ ፺፯ ዓመት ዕድሜያቸው ሞተው አዲስ ዓለም ማርያም ተቀበሩ።**

Aläk’a Wäldä-Yared Elariyon (Yäbiluy Lik’inna Yäk’ine Mämhir) T’irr 8 K’än Bä96 Amät idmeyafፑjāw Motäw Addis-Aläm Maryam Täk’äbbäru::  
‘Chief Wolde Yared Elarion (distinguished scholar of Old Testament and teacher of K’ine) died on January 8 at the age of 96 and was buried at Addis Alem St. Mary church.’

**አሣዥ ሽብር ኢብሳ (ቀድሞ የቤተመንግሥት ወምበር ሙሉ ቤት አሣዥም የነበሩት) መጋቢት ፲፭ ቀን ሞተው አዲስ አበባ ሥላሴ ተቀበሩ።**

Azza፯ jibbiru Ibsa (K’ädmo Yäbetä-Mängist Wämbär Mulu Bet Azza፯imm Yänäbbärut) Mäggabit 25 K’än Motäw Addis Abäba Sillase Täk’äbbäru::  
‘Commander Shibiru Ibsaj (formerly chair of the palace and latter commander in post of the whole house) died on March 25 and was buried at Addis Ababa Selassie (Trinity) church.’

**ወይዘሮ ደስታ አየለ (የጽሕፈት ሚኒስትሩ የጸሐፊ ትዕዛዝ ወልደመስቀል ሚስት) ሰኔ ፫ ቀን ሞተው አዲስ አበባ አስጢፋኖስ ተቀበሩ።**

Wäyzäro Dästa Ayyälä (Yä-S’ihfät Ministru Yäs’ähafe Ti፻zaz Wäldämäsk’äl Mist) Säne 3 K’än Motäw Addis Abäba ist’ifanos Täk’äbbäru::  
‘Mrs. Desta Ayele (the wife of the Minister of Pen, Chief Secretary Wolde Mesk’el) died on June 3 and was buried at Addis Ababa Estefan church.’

**የደጃዝማች ማሞ በዛብህ (የበዛብህ አባ ድክር ልጅ) ሞት ነሐሴ ፱ ቀን በጋሙ ተሰማ።**

Yä-Däçzazmatፑ Mammo Bäzzabbih (Yä-Bäzzabbih Abba Dikkir Liçç) Mot Nähase 9 K’än BäGämu Täsämma::  
‘Dejazmach Mammo Bezabbih’s (son of Bezzabbih Abba Dikir) death at Gemu was heard on August 9.’

In the above announcements, the two married women were identified with reference to their husbands. On the other hand, the three men were identified more with reference to their fathers, their heroic deeds and eminence in

scholarship. In all cases, there is gender inequity in the sense that maleness connotes self-identity, high prestige and superior status whereas femaleness connotes subordinate identity, low prestige and inferior status.

**Texts**

As texts are of utmost importance to investigate natural discourse and language use, the following two texts were randomly selected to demonstrate evidence for the male-biased grammar and pragmatics in Amharic.

Text 1 (Source: Tobiya (Afewerk, 1900))

**ይኸ ወሬ በያገሩ ተዘራና**

yi-h(ä) wäre bäyä- agär -u tä- zärr- a- nna  
 this-HE news throughout-country-HE.DEF PASS-spread-HE-CONJ

**ሁሉም በየዘመዱ**

hullu-mm bäyä- zämäd- u  
 all-FOC throughout-relative-HE.DEF

**መሞት መማረክ ይላቀስ ፊቱን ይነጭ**

mä-mot mä- mmaräk yi- llak'k'äs fit- u- n yi- nätf'  
 INF-die INF-surrender PROG-weep face-HE-ACC HE-scratch

**ጸጉሩን ይቆረጥ ጀመረ።**

t'ägur-u-n yi-k'k'orrät' dzemmär-ä.

hair-HE-ACC HE-cut start-HE

**የክርስቲያኑ ንጉስም የጦሩን ማለቅ**

yä-kiristiyān-u nigus-im yä-t'or- u- n mä- aläk'  
 of-Christian-HE king-FOC of-army-HE.DEF-ACC INF-perish

**የሶስቱንም ደጃዝማች መሞት**

yä-sost -u -n -imm dädzazmatfotfj mä-mot  
 of-three-HE.DEF-ACC-FOC (RANK) INF-die

**የአንደኛውንም ደጃዝማች መታሰር**

yä-andäḥna-w- in- imm dädzazmatf mä-tt- asär  
 of-first-HE.DEF-ACC-FOC (RANK) INF-PASS-imprison

**ያገሩንም መዘረፍና መጥፋት ባዬ ጊዜ**

yä-agär- u- n- imm mä-zzäraf-inna mä-t'fat bä- ayy- ä gize  
 of-country-HE.DEF-ACC-FOC INF-loot-CONJ INF-perish when-see-HE time

**ወዲያው በሐዘንና በድንጋጤ ታሞ ከጥቂት ቀን ወዲያ**

wodiyaw bä-hazän- inna bä-diniggat'e tamm-o kä-t'ik'it k'an wodiya  
 immediately by-sorrow-CONJ by-terrify be sick-HE P-few day after

**አለቀኑ ተቀሰፈ ሞተ።**

alä- k'an-u tä- k'ässäf-ä mot-ä.

NEG-day-HE PASS-exterminate-HE die-HE

የክርስቲያኑም አገር ባንድ ጊዜ ንጉስ አጣ

yä-kiristiyān-u- mm agär bā-and gize nīgus at't'-a  
of-Christian-DEF.HE-FOC country in-one time king lose-HE

ገዥ ጠፋብት። አገሩም ምድረበዳ ሆነ።

gäzi t'aff-a-bb-ät. agär- u -mm midrābāda hon-ä  
governor disappear-HE-MAL-HE country-HE.DEF-FOC desert become-HE

### Rough translation

This news having spread throughout the country, because of the death and surrender of relatives, everyone started to weep, to scratch his face and to cut his hair. The king of the Christians, having heard of the extermination of all the army, the death of the three top Dejzasmaches, the imprisonment of one Dejzasmach, the looting and devastation of the country, suffered deep sorrow and shock, became seriously sick and unexpectedly within a few days died. The Christian country, within a short period, became a land that had lost its king and remained with no governor. The whole country became a desert.

As shown in the text, there exists a significant difference between the representation of males and the representation of females. The preponderance of the masculine gender (3MS) in Amharic is obvious from the text in which not even a single female attribute appears. All the nouns: *wore* 'news', *agär* 'country', *zämäd* 'relative', *fit* 'face', *t'ägur* 'hair', *kiristiyān* 'Christian', *nīgus* 'king', *t'or* 'army', *dädzazmatf* 'traditional military rank', *gize* 'time', *hazän* 'sorrow', *diniggat'e* 'fear', *k'än* 'day' and *gäzi* 'governor' are in the masculine gender and demand the corresponding masculine AGR elements.

Text 2 (Source: Habtinna T'eninnät (Maaza, 1948))

በዚህ ዓለም ለሚኖር ሰው መጀመሪያ ሙሉ ጤንነት ሁለተኛ

bä-iz-yih aläm lä-imm-yi-nor säw mädzämmäriya mulu t'eninnät hulättäṅṅa  
P-here-HE world P-REL-HE-live man first full health secondly

ሙሉ ሃብት አስፈላጊዎች ናቸው። ከእነዚህ ከሁለቱ

mulu habt asfällagi-wot[t]f nä-at[tf]äw. kä-innä-iz-yih kä-hulätt-u  
full wealth necessity-PL COP-3PL P-PL-here.HE P-two-DEF

አንዱ የጎደለው አንደኛው ራሱን

and-u yä-goddäl-ä-w indä- hon- ä ras- u- n  
one-HE.DEF if-lack-HE-HE.OBJ COMP-become-HE self-HE-ACC

ለመርዳት የማይችል ደካማ ከመሆኑም በላይ

lä-mä-rdat yä-imm-al-yi-tʃil dākkama kä-mä-hon-u-mm bä-lay  
 P-INF-help REL-FOC-NEG-HE-able weak P-INF-become-HE-FOC P-top

**ዘመዶቹንና ጓደኞቹን አስቸጋሪ ይሆናል።**

zämäd-otʃtʃ-u- n- inna g<sup>w</sup>adäññ-otʃtʃ-u-n astʃäggari yi- hon- all  
 relative-PL-HE-ACC-CONJ friend- PL-HE-ACC troublesome HE-become-AUX

**ዕድሜውንና ስንቁን ቆጣቢው**

idme-w-in-inna sink'- u-n k'ot't'ab-i-w  
 age-HE-ACC-CONJ food supply-DEF.HE-ACC save-AGN-HE

**ባለቤቱ ነው እንደተባለው**

baläbet- u nä-w indä-tä- bal- ä- w  
 possessor-DEF.HE COP-HE COMP-PASS-say-HE-HE.OBJ

**ሃብቱንና ጤንነቱን ሊያስረዝማቸው**

habt- u- n- inna t'eninnät-u-n li-yi-as-räzim-atʃtʃäw  
 wealth-HE-ACC-CONJ health-HE-ACC COMP-HE-CAUS-prolong-3PL

**ወይም ሊያሳጥራቸው የሚችል ራሱ**

woyimm li- yi- as- at't'ir-atʃtʃäw yä-m- yi- tʃil ras-u  
 or COMP-HE-CAUS-shorten-3PL REL-IMPER-HE-be able self-DEF.HE

**ባለቤቱ ስለሆነ አክብሮና ተጠንቅቆ**

baläbet-u silä-hon-ä akbir-o-inna tät'änk'ik'-o  
 possessor-HE COMP-be-HE respect-HE-CONJ be careful-HE

**ሊይዛቸው ይገባዋል።**

l-i-yiz-atʃtʃäw yigäbb-aw-all  
 COMP-HE-hold-3PL should-HE-AUX

**ሃብትና ጤንነትም አንድ ጊዜ ያመለጡ እንደሆነ**

habt-inna t'eninnät-imm and gize yä-amällät'-u indä-hon-ä  
 wealth-CONJ health- FOC one time if-escape-3PL COMP-be-HE

**ወደ ቀደመ ቦታቸው ለመመለስ**

wädä k'äddäm-ä bota- atʃtʃäw lä-mä-mälläs  
 to former-HE place-3PL P-INF-return

**ብዙ ድካምና ትግል እንዳለ ብዙም ገንዘብ**

bizu dikam-inna tigil indä-all-ä bizu-mm gänzäb  
 many effort-CONJ strive COMP-exist-HE many-FOC money

**ወጭ ማድረግ እንደሚያስፈልግ የታወቀ ነው።**

wotʃ'i mä-adräg indä-m- yi-as-fällig yä- tä- awwäk'-ä nä- w.  
 expenditure INF-do COMP-IMPER-HE-CAUS-need REL-PASS-know-HE COP-HE

**ስለዚህ ይህች መጽሐፍ ሃብትና ጤንነት**

siläzih yih-itʃtʃ mäs'ihaf habt-inna t'eninnät  
 hence this.HE-SHE book wealth-CONJ health

**የሚጠበቁትን ዘዴ**

yä-mm-yi- t'äbbäk'-u-bb-ät- in zäde  
REL-IMPER-3PL-keep-3PL-MAL-INS-ACC mechanism

**የምታመለክትና የምታስጠነቅቅ ስለሆነች**

yä-mmi- t- amäläkät-inna yä- mm- t- as-t'änäk'ik' silä-hon-ät[ʃ]  
REL-IMPER-SHE-indicate- CONJ REL-IMPER-SHE-CAUS-warn COMP-be-SHE

**ሃብትና ጤንነት ተብላ ተሰየመች።**

habt-inna t'eninnät tä- bl-a tä-säyyäm-ät[ʃ]  
wealth-CONJ health PASS-say-3FS PASS-named after-SHE

**Rough translation:**

To a human being in this world, first, full health and second, full wealth are of high value. If one of the two is lacking, one becomes weak and fails not only to help himself but also creates troubles for his relatives and friends. As the proverb goes, 'It is only the possessor himself who can keep his age and his provisions for long'. At the same time, it is the possessor who can shorten his life and lose his wealth. For this reason, he has to handle the two with respect and care. As to wealth and health, once they start declining, it is well-known that it requires tiresome ups and downs and a lot of expenditure of money to bring them back to their original state. Hence, this small book is named 'Wealth and Health' as she shows how to take care of wealth and health.

In the above text, the author imparts important culture-bound points to his readers about health and wealth. The 3MS agreement marker appears thirty-six times in this small text and hence almost all generic and common nouns appear in the masculine gender. Hence, nouns such as *säw* 'human being/man', *t'eninnat* 'health', *habt* 'wealth', *ras* 'head', *idme* 'age', *sink* 'food supply', *bota* 'place', etc. are all masculine. But in the last statements the author resorts to the use of the feminine gender six times when he refers to his own small book, which again underlines the strong connection between smallness and the feminine gender.

**Conclusion**

The topic of gender-sensitive speech is one of the central issues in sociolinguistics for the strong intimacy between language and society is clearly shown in what is called gender linguistics. Gender is a social category that reflects social perception. The social perception, in its turn, is expressed through language or linguistic signals. Gender symmetries or asymmetries are encoded in language and hence the study of the system of a language and its

use enables to better understand society. In addition to naturally male nouns, other nouns in different semantic fields, including those without gender, are masculine, especially when there is a connotation of augmentation. HE refers not only to male referents but also to generic nouns which are either genderless or may denote either 'female' or 'male'. Naturally female nouns as well as some nouns without natural gender but small-sized are grammatically feminine. With concrete nouns, gender classification in Amharic correlates mainly with size. Even derived nominals, plural pronouns, demonstratives and so on are most often grammatically masculine. As a result, the occurrence of HE statistically greatly exceeds the occurrence of SHE. In Amharic, the correlation between natural/biological gender and grammatical gender does not always follow real-world semantic patterns and hence, structurally and pragmatically, Amharic is a male-biased language.

Feminists consider English as a 'man-made' language and an agent of women's oppression. If that is the case, how would Amharic and several other male-biased languages be labelled in the hierarchy? The grammar and pragmatic practices of languages have been the subject of feminist scrutiny, often leading to elaborated and sometimes exaggerated descriptions of sexist practices. Creating a women-centered language, the introduction of new words with new women-centered meanings and the avoidance of HE-centered structures and uses have been recommended by promoters of the feminist movement especially in America and Europe. Nevertheless, no sexist language has been altered to a non-sexist language in any part of the world.<sup>10</sup> In the Ethiopian context, as part of the Ethiopian millenium development goals, there are on-going efforts to address gender-related issues, alleviate the deep-rooted problems and bring about change of perception. There are efforts in the education sector to promote gender equality in the curriculum. Meanwhile, the fact that a gender-biased grammar exists has relatively been unnoticed and the pragmatics has not been given much attention. The reason is perhaps because of the prevalence of other pressing and practical issues observed on a daily basis regarding female inequality. The socio-political and economic issues attract more attention from anthropologists, sociologists and other scholars in humanities. Unequivocally, the society should internalize women's equality through the elimination of gender discrimination and should profoundly understand and appreciate and recognize women's

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<sup>10</sup> In German, a conscious attempt to add – *in* to feminine professions: *Bibliothekerin* vs. *Bibliotheker*, *Wissenschaftlerin* vs. *Wissenschaftler*, etc.) has had considerable success (Orin Gensler, p.c.).

contributions to society. The manifestations of the patriarchal value systems that have a direct effect on cultural and social practices should lessen. In such societies, language is undeniably a powerful instrument of patriarchy, but not really 'man-made'.

Evidently, Ethiopian society is highly patriarchal and hence in most parts of the country, females are looked down on as lower in their social, economic and political status. By any measurement, however, ethnolinguistic groups are never misogynist. What we should work hard for is to gradually but surely create a society where men and women enjoy equal acceptance and status in political, economic and social activities. Creating a more gender-neutral language or replacing a male-biased grammar by a female-biased grammar or thinking to form a 'democratic' language that treats the two genders equally might not be impossible, but it is a long shot – for some not even worth considering. If need be, symmetrical language planning in the African context would be a worthwhile activity provided that the necessary change of mind and attitude toward gender equality is attained first.

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#### Abbreviations and Acronyms

1SG	1st singular	F	female/feminine
1PL	1st plural	EMPH	Emphasis
2FS	2nd feminine singular	FOC	Focus
2MS	2nd masculine singular	fc	Forthcoming
2PL	2nd plural	IMPER	imperfective
3FS	3rd feminine singular	INF	infinitive
3MS	3rd masculine singular	JUSS	jussive
3PL	3rd plural	M	male/masculine
ABS	Abstract	nd	no date
ACC	accusative	NEG	negative
ADJ	adjective	OBJ	object
AGN	agentive	P	preposition
AGR	agreement	p.c.	personal communication
AUX	auxiliary	PASS	passive
COMP	complementizer	PL	plural
CONJ	conjunction	POSS	possessive
CONN	connector	PS	past
COP	copula	REL	relative
DEF	definite		

