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9. Basic syntax

This chapter presents word order in noun phrases and simple sentences. It also treats verbless sentences and contains information on both comparatives and equative sentences. The comparative sentences are first discussed, followed by the discussion about equatives. Finally, we examine relative clauses.

9.1. Word order

9.1.1. Word order in noun phrases

A noun phrase may consist of just a noun. The following are illustrative examples:

(1a) kumayta
    stick
    ‘a stick’

(1b) tapayta
    rat
    ‘a rat’

(1c) iskatta
    women
    ‘women’

(1d) cānmayaa
    old.men
    ‘old men’

A noun phrase may consist of a head noun and a definite suffix as shown in (2).

(2a) kūta-siʔ
    dog-DEF.M/F
    ‘the dog’

(2b) orra-siʔ
    people-DEF.M/F
    ‘the people’

(2c) kāharrā-siniʔ
    sheep-DEF.P
    ‘the sheep’
A noun phrase can also be formed from a noun and a demonstrative suffix. For instance, the demonstrative suffix -osiʔ occurs with the noun tika ‘house’ in (3a), and the demonstrative suffix -osiniʔ occurs with the noun dillaa ‘fields’ in (3b).

(3a) tikoosiʔ  
**tika-osiiʔ**  
house-DEM.M/F  
‘this house’

(3b) dilloosiniʔ  
**dillaa-osiniʔ**  
fields-DEM.P  
‘these fields’

A noun phrase may contain a head noun with possessive suffixes, as shown in (4).

(4a) tika-awu  
**house-1SG.POSS.M/F**  
‘my house’

(4b) fillaa-ssu  
**comb-3PL.POSS.P**  
‘their comb’

(4c) Ɂormadaassin  
**oxen-2PL.POSS.P**  
‘your oxen’

Indefinite head nouns modified by attributive adjectives contain a relative particle a, as in (5a-b). Such noun phrases may be followed by a quantifier, as in (5c-d).

(5a) nama a dɛr-a  
**person REL be.tall-SG**  
‘a tall person’  
(lit.: ‘a person who is tall’).
In noun phrases composed of a head noun and a quantifier, the word order is head noun followed by quantifiers. When numerals higher than one are used as quantifiers, singulative nouns are used in the noun phrases, as in (6a-b). In noun phrases, plurative nouns may occur with numerals higher than one as in (6c-d).

(5b) hellaa a dëd-dër-aaʔ
children REL PL-be.tall-P
‘tall children’
(lit.: ‘children who are tall’)

(5c) ɗoyra a dër-a tokka
tree REL be.tall-S one
‘a tall tree’
(lit.: ‘a tree which is tall’)

(5d) ɗoraa a dëd-dëral lakki
dër-aa a dëd-dër-aaʔ lakki
trees REL PL-be.tall-P two
‘two tall trees’
(lit.: ‘two trees which are tall’)

The use of the singulative noun nama ‘person’ in the context of noun phrases quantified with numerals higher than one is special in that its suppletive plural form orra ‘persons, people’ is never used with numeral quantifiers, as the ungrammaticality of (7b) illustrates.
Interestingly, both nama ‘person’ and orra ‘persons, people’ may occur with such quantifiers as lamayta ‘some.M’ as shown in (8).

(8a)  nama lamayta aytulaa ca
    nama lamayta=i aytulaa kiy-a
    person some.M=3 out.there be-IPF.FUT
    ‘There are some people out there.’

(8b)  orra lamayta aytulaa ca
    orra lamayta=i aye-tulaa kiy-a
    persons some.M=3 out.there be-IPF.FUT
    ‘There are some people out there.’

The quantifier piisa ‘all’ may occur together with numerals in noun phrases. The order is that the numeral precedes the quantifier. Here is an example:

(9)  antih hellaasinik ken piisan akkay
    antiʔ hellaasiniʔ ken
    1SG.PRO-NOM children-DEF.P five

    piisa=in akk-ay
    all=1 see-PF[3M]
    ‘I saw all five children.’

9.1.2. Word order in simple sentences

In simple sentences with intransitive verbs and overt subjects, the word order is that the subject precedes the verb as in (10a-b). In simple sentences with overt subject and overt object, the word order is subject—object—verb as in (10c-d).

(10a)  iʃeennaχ χala iɗeʔti
    iʃeennaʔ χala i=ɗey-t-i
    3SGF.PRO-NOM yesterday 3=come-3F-PF
    ‘She came yesterday.’
The above simple sentences may occur without the overt subjects, in which case the subjects are understood from the type of the subject clitic and the gender agreement marker on the verb. The sentences in (10a) and (10c) are repeated below as (11a) and (11b) without the subject noun.

(11a) χala iɗeyti
χala i=ɗey-t-i
yesterday 3 = come-3F-PF
‘She came yesterday.’

(11b) ɩoyra-siʔ ʔimuray
  ɩoyra-siʔ i=mur-ay
  tree-DEF.M/F 3 = cut[SG]-PF[3M]
‘He cut the tree.’

Below, I show different word orders that are possible, without discussing the meaning differences. For example, the SV word order in (10a), repeated here as (12a), has the VS order in (12b). The examples in (12c-f) have the same constituents but differ in the order of those constituents: (12c) has SOV word order, (12d) has SVO word order, (12e) has VSO word order, and (12f) has OVS word order. VOS and OSV word orders are also possible, though I do not show them here. Further research is needed to determine the functional differences of these word order variants.

(12a) ɩeennaχ χala ideyti
  ɩeenna-ʔ χala i=ɗey-t-i
  3SGF.PRO-NOM yesterday 3 = come-3F-PF
‘She came.’
Simple sentences may occur with temporal adverbs such as χala ‘yesterday’ and parre ‘tomorrow’. Such temporal adverbs are not restricted in their position. They may occur sentence initially as in (13a), between the subject and object as in (13b), between the object and the verb as in (13c) or sentence final as in (13d).

(13a) χala ƙimaytasik karmaa iʔiʃʃay
χala ƙimayta-siʔ ƙarmaa  i=iʃʃ-ay
yesterday old.man-DEF.M/F lion 3 = kill-PF[3M]
‘Yesterday the old man killed a lion.’

(13b) ƙimaytasik χala karmaa iʔiʃʃay
ƙimayta-siʔ ƙala ƙarmaa  i=iʃʃ-ay
old.man-DEF.M/F yesterday lion 3 = kill-PF[3M]
‘Yesterday the old man killed a lion.’

(13c) ƙimaytasik ƙarmaa χala iʔiʃʃay
ƙimayta-siʔ ƙarmaa ƙala  i=iʃʃ-ay
old.man-DEF.M/F lion yesterday 3 = kill-PF[3M]
‘The old man killed a lion yesterday.’
Verbless sentences

The predicate of a sentence can be a verb, noun, adjective or adverb. Verbless sentences may contain nouns that express a profession as in (14a) or a place of origin as in (14b-e).

(14a) antiʔ ?anʔakimitta  
\[anti-ʔ \quad an=akim-itta\]  
1SG.PRO-NOM 1=treat.patient-3SGM  
‘I am a physician.’

(14b) namasiʄ ʄiraatitta  
\[nama-siʔ \quad ʄiraat-itta\]  
man-DEF.M/F Dirashe-3SGM  
‘The man is a Diraʃitta.’

(14c) iʃeenaʔ ʔakimtteeta  
\[iʃeena-ʔ \quad akim-tteeta\]  
3SGF.PRO-NOM treat.patient-3SGF  
‘She is a physician.’

(14d) iʃinaʔ ʔaʔʔakimiyyaa  
\[iʃina-ʔ \quad a?=akim-iyyaa\]  
2PL.PRO-NOM 2=treat.patient-P  
‘(You (SG)) are physicians.’

(14e) orroosik kawwaadaa  
\[orra-osiʔ \quad kawwaadaa\]  
people-DEM.M/F Gawwada  
‘These people are Gawwada.’

Verbless sentences may also be formed from temporal adverbs. The nominative suffix -ʔ is added to names of the days of the week. Here are some examples:

(15a) awwi palawwa  
today Saturday  
‘Today is Saturday.’

(15b) χala lankayya  
yesterday Tuesday  
‘Yesterday was Tuesday.’
Temporal adverbs and question words such as ayfa ‘where?’ and aytamu ‘when?’ also form verbless sentences, as shown in (16).

(16a) awwi ayfa
today where
‘What is the day today?’
(lit.: Where is today?)

(16b) palawwaʔ ?aytamu
Saturday-NOM when
‘When is Saturday?’

Verbless sentences can also be formed from numerals with possessor nouns, as shown below.

(17a) hellaa-ssu lakki
children-3PL.POSS.P two
‘They have two children.’
(lit.: ‘Their children are two.’)

(17b) dillaa-yyu sessa
fields-1SG.POSS.P three
‘I have three fields.’
(lit.: ‘My fields are three.’)

Furthermore, verbless sentences may be formed from demonstrative pronouns and other nominals, as illustrated in (18).

(18a) sedi tika-awu
this house-1SG.POSS.M/F
‘This is my house.’

(18b) seni pinaanaa
these wild.animals
‘These are wild animals.’
9.3. Comparative and equative sentences

A comparative construction is expressed by the postposition çara ‘on’ and the verb root çap- ‘to have’. çara çap- is a phrase used for ‘to exceed’. The following are illustrative examples.

(19a) Apittuɗ derumaak Kappooli çara içapa

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
\text{Apittu-ʔ} & \text{der-umaa-ʔ} & \text{Kappooli} \\
\text{Apittu-NOM} & \text{be.tall-ABS-DAT} & \text{Kappooli} \\
\end{array}
\]

çara \( i = çap-a \)

on \( 3 = \text{exceed-IPF.FUT} \)

‘Apittu is taller than Kappoole.’

(lit.: ‘Apitto exceeds Kappoole for tallness.’)

(19b) Iahasik kappumaaç Çolpasic çara icapa

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
laha-sik & kapp-umaa-ʔ & Çolpa-siʔ \\
\text{ram-DEF.M/F} & \text{be.fat-ABS-DAT} & \text{he-goat-DEF.M/F} \\
\end{array}
\]

çara \( i = çap-a \)

on \( 3 = \text{exceed-IPF.FUT} \)

‘The ram is fatter than the he-goat.’

(lit.: The ram exceeds the he-goat for fatness.)

Equative sentences are expressed by a construction in which the equated element is the subject, the entity to which it is equated receives the postposition minaʔ ‘in front of (facing)’ and the value of comparison is expressed in a predicative adjective or a (derived) abstract noun plus the dative and a verb ‘to be’. The equated element may be a pronoun (20a), an independent possessive pronoun (20b) or a noun preceded by a genitive (20c).

(20a) Inantasí? ʔifa minaʔe derumaak kita

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
inanta-siʔ & ʔifa & minaʔ=i & \text{der-umaa-ʔ} \\
girl-DEF.M/F & \text{he} & \text{in.front.of} = 3 & \text{be.tall-ABS-DAT} \\
\end{array}
\]

\( ky-t-a \)

be-3F-IPF.FUT

‘The girl is as tall as he is.’

(20b) Inantasí ʔayya minaʔe deri

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
inanta-siʔ & ʔayya & minaʔ=i & \text{der-i} \\
girl-DEF.M/F & \text{mine} & \text{in.front.of} = 3 & \text{be.tall-PF} \\
\end{array}
\]

‘The girl is as tall as I am.’
9.4. Relative clauses

Relative clauses follow their head noun. Except for a definite head noun in subject relative clauses, the head noun is marked by the relative particle ʔa. In subject relative clauses in which the head noun is definite, there are no subject clitics. The head noun is never represented in the relative clause by a pronoun. Moreover, there is no marking of the end of the relative clause. Special verb forms are used in relative clauses. These special forms mark gender and/or number and vary with respect to aspect. For example, in the present imperfective, first person singular and third person singular masculine add -yo; plurals of all persons and single nouns with plural gender value add -yaaʔ; second person singular, third person singular feminine and nouns that show third feminine gender agreement marker on the verb add -ttu. These forms are added after the present imperfective suffix -ni. The special forms are followed by the cleft construction marker (see also Section 3.5). The following are illustrative examples:

(22a)  ana a urmlaapa anniyoo ʔa akkay
        ana  a   urmlaa-opa
        1SG.PRO.ACC  REL  market-to

        an-ni-yo-ő    iʔa
        go-IPF.PRES-1SG/3SGM-CLF  3SGM.PRO.ACC

        akk-ay
        see-PF[3M]

‘It’s me who was going to the market who saw him.’
(22b) iʃoonna a urmalaapa anniyaaʔé iʃa akkay

iʃoonna a urmala-opa
2PL.PRO.ACC REL market-to

an-ni-yaaʔ-é iʃa
go-IPF.PRES-P-CLF 3SGM.PRO.ACC

akk-ay
see-PF[3M]
‘It’s you (PL) who went to the market and saw him.’

(22c) iʃeenna a urmalaapa annittoó iʃa akkay

iʃeenna a urmalaa-opa
3SGF.PRO.ACC REL market-to

an-ni-ttu-ó iʃa akk-ay
go-IPF.PRES-P-CLF 3SGM.PRO.ACC see-PF[3M]
‘It’s her who went to the market and saw him.’

It is also common for first person singular to add -ttu in the present imperfective.

In the future imperfective, except second person plural and third person plural, the remaining persons replace the future imperfective marker -a with -u. The second person plural, the third person plural and single reference nouns with plural gender value add -aʔ to the future imperfective suffix. Here are some examples:

(23a) antiʔ ?inantasiʔ ?urmalaapa antun upa

antiʔ ?inanta-siʔ urmalaa-opa
1SG.PRO-NOM girl-DEF.M/F market-to

an-t-u=in up-a
go-3F-1SG/1PL/2SG/3SGM/3SGF = 1 know-IPF.FUT
‘I know the girl who will go to the market.’

(23b) antit tuparraasiniʔ ?urmalaapa anaaʔ ?inupa

antiʔ tuparraa-siniʔ urmalaa-opa
1SG.PRO-NOM girl-DEF.M/F market-to

an-aaʔ in=up-a
go-P 1 = know-IPF.FUT
‘I know the girls who will go to the market.’
In the perfective, except the second person singular and third person singular feminine, the remaining persons have the third person masculine perfective suffix -ay. All plural persons add -eeʔ after -ay. The second person singular and third person singular feminine have the perfective marker -i. The following are demonstrative examples.

(24a)  hellasiniχ χala hirayeeʔin akkay
       hella-siniʔ χala hir-ay-eeʔ=in
       children-DEF.P yesterday run[PL]-PF[3M]-P = 1

akk-ay
see-PF[3M]
‘I saw the children who ran yesterday.’

(24b)  innaasiniχ χala ɗeyayeeʔin akkay
       innaa-siniʔ χala ɗey-ay-eeʔ=in
       children-DEF.P yesterday come-PF[3M]-P = 1

akk-ay
see-PF[3M]
‘I saw the child who came yesterday.’

(24c)  inanta a deʔti ideri
       inanta a dey-t-i i=ɗer-i
       girl REL come-3F-PF 3=be.tall-PF
‘The girl who came is tall.’

In the subsequent subsections, I discuss word order in relative clauses, subject relative clauses, non-subject relative clauses and headless relative clauses.

9.4.1. Word order in relative clauses

In relative clauses with indefinite antecedent, the word order is that the head noun is followed by the relative particle ?a. The relative particle is followed by the object, which, in turn, is followed by the verb as in (25a). With definite subjects, the head noun is followed by the object, which is, in turn, followed by the verb as in (25b). Note that despite the English translation in (25a), the head noun is indefinite.

(25a)  nama a sawwi çaarçaar-ay i=dey-ay
       person REL Sawwe help-PF[3M] 3 = come-PF[3F]
‘The person who helped Sawwe came.’

(25b)  nama-siʔ sawwi çaarçaar-ay
       person-DEF.M/F Sawwe help-PF[3M]
In subject relative clauses, the word order is strict. For example, any reordering of the constituents of the example in (25a) yields unacceptable sentences, as in (26): (26a) is unacceptable because the relative particle occurs clause-initially. Similarly, sentence (26b) is unacceptable because the relative particle comes after the object noun sawwe (proper name); (26c) is unacceptable since the verb is moved from its clause-final position; (26d) is unacceptable because the object of the relative clause precedes the definite head noun.

(26a) *a nama sawwe ʛaarʛaar-ay i=ɗey-ay
REL person Sawwe help-PF[3M] 3=come-PF[3M]
(intended: ‘The person who helped Sawwe came.’)

(26b) *nama sawwe a ʛaarʛaar-ay i=ɗey-ay
person Sawwe REL help-PF[3M] 3=come-PF[3M]
(intended: ‘The person who helped Sawwe came.’)

(26c) *a ʛaarʛaar-ay nama sawwe i=ɗey-ay
REL help-PF[3M] person Sawwe 3=come-PF[3M]
(intended: ‘The person who helped Sawwe came.’)

(26d) *sawwe namasiʛ ʛaarʛaaray iɗeyay
*sawwe nama-siʔ ʛaarʛaar-ay
sawwe person-DEF.M/F help-PF[3M]

i=ɗey-ay
3=come-PF[3M]
(intended: ‘The person who helped sawwe came.’)

In object relative clauses, the reordering of the subject and object is needed. In (27a), we have a subject relative clause but an object relative clause in (27b).

(27a) hellaasinic Đốiasiʔ ?iʛafayecʔ? ?iʛacʔapamin
hella-siʔ Đối-siʔ
children-DEF.P he-goat-DEF.M/F

?iʛaf-ay-ecʔ  i=ʛacʔ-clip-am-i-n
kill-PF[3M]-P 3=PL-catch-PAS-PF-P
‘The children who killed the he-goat were caught.’
(27b)  cəlpaytasee a hellaa-siniʔ? tiʃʃin icʃamay
    cəlpayta-si=i ʔa hellaa-siniʔ? tiʃʃ-i-n
    he-goat-DEF.M/F=3 REL children-DEF.P kill-PF-P
    i=ciʃam-ay
    3=slaughter-PAS-PF[3M]
    ‘The he-goat that the children killed was slaughtered.’

9.4.2. Subject relative clauses

In subject relative clauses, the head noun is the subject of the relative clause. Subject relative clauses can be headed by a definite head noun (28a-b) or an indefinite head noun (28c-d).

(28a)  filaa-siniʔ patayeeʔ tiʃyaɗin
    filaa-siniʔ pat-ay-eeʔ
    comb-DEF.P be.lost-PF[3M]-P
    i=tiʃyaɗ-i-n
    3=find.MID-PF-P
    ‘The comb that went missing was found.’

(28b)  orra-siʔ ciʃora ciʃur-ay idey
    orra-siʔ ciʃora ciʃur-ay
    people-DEF.M/F trees cut[PL]-PF[3M]
    i=idey
    3=come-PF[3M]
    ‘The people who cut trees came.’

(28c)  tika a palɗ-aʔ i=paʈaar-i
    house REL be.wide-REL 3=be.good-PF
    ‘A house that is wide is good.’

(28d)  orra a ciʃora ciʃur-ay i=dey-ay
    people REL trees cut[PL]-PF[3M] 3=come-PF[3M]
    ‘People who cut trees came.’

9.4.3. Non-subject relative clauses

In non-subject relative clauses, the head noun is not the subject of the clause. In such relative clauses, the object of the verb can be relativised. In (29) the object ʔokkatta ‘cow’ is relativised as a definite object head noun (29a) and as an indefinite head noun in (29b).
(29a)  antiʔ ʔokkatta-sik katamayin akkay
        antiʔ ʔokkatta-siʔ kat-am-ay=in akk-ay
 1SG.PRO-NOM  cow-DEF.M/F  sell-PAS-PF[3M]=1  see-[3M]
‘I saw the cow that was sold.’

(29b)  antiʔ ʔokkatta a katamayin akkay
        antiʔ ʔokkatta a kat-am-ay=in  akk-ay
 1SG.PRO-NOM  cow  REL  see-[3M]
‘I saw a cow that was sold.’

In non-subject relative clauses, the object of the dative can also be relativised. In (30a), object noun in the dative phrase konfa ‘shorts’ is relativised. In (30b), (irrespective of the English translation) the indefinite dative object ohta ‘blanket’ is relativised.

(30a)  konfaseen kappoolip piɗɗay ikeray
        konfa-siʔ a=in kappoole-ʔ
        shorts-DEF.M/F  REL=1 kappoole-DAT
        piɗɗ-ay  i=ker-ay
        buy[SG]-PF[3M]  3=be.old-PF[3M]
‘The shorts that I bought for Kappoole got worn out.’

(30b)  ohta ak kantoolid daassi ?baldi
        ohta a=iʔ  kantoole-ʔ  daaf-t-i  i=bald-i
        blanket  REL=2  kantoole-DAT  give-2-PF  3=be.wide-PF
‘The blanket that you (SG) gave to Kantoole was wide.’

In non-subject clauses, the object of the postposition can be relativised, as in (31).

(31)  çoyraseen çaraa luukkata pohay imuramay
        çoyra-siʔ=in  çaraa  luukkata
        tree-DEF.M/F=1  on  fruit
        poh-ay  i=mur-am-ay
‘The tree that I picked the fruits from was cut.’
9.4.4. Headless relative clauses

Headless relative clauses are characterised by not having overt head nouns. This is shown in the following examples:

(32a)  an iʃa akkinu male anɗeʔnu
        a = in       iʃa             akki-n-u
        REL = 1    3SGM.PRO[ACC]   see-1PL-NEG.IPF.FUT

        male      an = dey-n-u
        without  1NEG = come-1PL-NEG.IPF.FUT
        ‘Unless we see him, we shall not come (back).’

(32b)  aa inun akkin male inɗeyan
        a = i       inu = in          akk-n
        REL = 3    1PL.PRO[ACC] = 3NEG   see-P

        male      in = dcy-a-n
        without  3NEG = come-IPF.FUT-P
        ‘Unless they see us, they will not come (back).’