

Verbal Nouns in Amharic

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1 Introduction

Amharic has a class of constructions which are formed by prefixing a nominalizer element *mə* on the imperfective form of the verbs.

- (1) a. *mə-hon* = ‘being, to be’
b. *mə-sbər* = ‘breaking, to break’
c. *mə-mot* = ‘dying, to die’

These constructions are used to translate both the infinitives and gerunds of English.

- (2) Josef wants to kiss Marry
yosef mariam-n mə-sam fəlləg-ə
Josef Mary-acc CM-kill want-3msgS
- (3) Josef’s kissing Marry surprised the guests
yə-yosef mariam-n mə-ssam ingd-očč-u-n asgərrəmə
Of-Josef Mary-acc CM-kissing guest-pl-acc surprise

Syntactically, these constructions behave both like nominal and clausal categories.

Like nouns and unlike verbs, they appear in subject (4) and object (5) positions of transitive verbs.

- (4) [*yə-yosef mariam-n mə-sam*] *inat-u-n abəsačč’at*
[of-Josef Mary-acc CM-kiss]mother-3msPoss-acc enraged
‘Josef’s kissing Mary enraged his mother’
- (5) *yə-yosef mariam-n mə-sam inat-u alwəddədəččwm*
of-Josef Mary-acc CM-kiss mother-3msPoss disliked
‘His [Josef’s] mother disliked Josef’s kissing Mary’

Like verbs and unlike nouns, they take direct object complements and adverbial modifiers.

- (6) *yə-mariam yosef-n kifugna mə-mtat*
Of-Mary Josef-acc badly CM-kick
‘Mary’s badly kicking of Josef...’

Due to their nominal properties, some linguists consider them as nominal categories and call them “verbal nouns”, “gerunds” or “gerundives” putting them in par with the English gerunds (Yimam, 1999; Leslau, 1967). Due to their verbal properties, a number of other linguists, on the other hand, call them “infinitives” (Dawkins, 1969; Fantaye, 1957).

While most of these linguists acknowledge the ambiguous nature of these constructions, the issue that none of them systematically tackled is then whether these constructions should be considered as nominal or verbal categories. While the dominant view right now is to consider them as infinitives, as most linguists gloss them as infinitives, no work has assessed their categorial status systematically.

In this paper, I will attempt to tackle this issue. I will show that the *mə*-constructions should be considered as gerundives rather than infinitives. I will specifically show that they have much more common properties with the gerunds of English than the infinitives.

I will then argue that the verbal properties are the relics of the nominalization process they undergo. Following Abney’s (1987) style of analysis, in the second part of the paper, I will argue that they are made of VP-projections inserted under the D-projection. These constructions are an instance of a recursive DP construction where the embedded vP freezes (spells out), it functions as the categorial foundation for building a further DP layer.

The paper as a whole attempts to address the morpho-syntactic properties of *mə*- constructions in Amharic. To be precise, I envision to achieve three major objectives.

First, I want to determine the categorial status of the verbal nouns. Should they be treated as gerundives or infinitives? is it appropriate to classify them as nominal or verbal categories? Probing evidences from various sources, I will attempt devise defining characters of infinitives and gerunds at a cross-linguistic level. I will then test the verbal nouns (*mə*-constructions) of Amharic using these test to see to which class they fit best. The gerunds and infinitives of English specifically will serve as the spring board for the characterization of infinitives and more importantly of gerunds.

At the outset, one might question the soundness of the comparison of the *mə*-clauses with the verbal nouns (gerunds) of English as a means to determiner the categorial status of the Amharic verbal nouns. The fact of the matter is English is one of the deeply investigated languages we have so far. An explicit comparison with it could facilitate the research in Amharic, I believe. Secondly, some other linguists, without any explicit discussion, seem also convinced that the *mə*-clauses in Amharic are closer to the English gerundives than the infinitives. Yimam (1999) for example calls the *mə*-clauses *gerundives* rather than infinitives. In addition, even if we can eschew the comparison with English verbal nouns, we can not eschew the need to determine their categorial status. Therefore, in this paper, I will engage myself in comparing them with the English verbal nouns taking advantage of the rich literature developed around the English verbal nouns.

Second, I will develop a sketch for the syntactic analysis of the structure of the verbal nouns. I will also attempt to explain the root cause of their mixed properties. I will argue, following Abney’s work on English gerundives, that their nominal and verbal properties are due to the layering of different syntactic categories into these constructions. In that part of the paper, I will show that gerundive constructions (nominalizations at large) pose a major empirical challenge to the labeling algorithm developed in BPS (Chomsky, 2008) for the elements which cause the category conversion (recategorization)in gerundives are not LIs, rather singleton features. I contend then that the labels of structures are determined by (re)-merging of sub-features of the

LIs, rather than the LIs themselves.

In the third part of the paper, I will return to the distribution of PRO, case and agreement properties of the verbal nouns. I will argue that, contra to what have been claimed recently in Pires (2006) and the Movement theory of control advocated in a number of works in Hornstein, movement can not be responsible for the presence of null subjects (PRO or trace) in the verbal nouns. As such, I will start from investigating the role of the lexical semantics of the matrix predicates in determining the morpho-syntax of the gerundive clause. I will also look closely to agreement and case evidences and the ramifications these evidences could have on the properties of PRO and lexical subjects.

2 The properties of the verbal nouns

As already noted, there is a widespread confusion (or disagreement) on the categorial status of *mə*-constructions. Some linguists consider them as infinitives while other take them as gerunds (gerundives).

In an important book written in English, Dawkins (1969) probably for the first time explicitly called them “infinitives” and compared them with English infinitives.

The infinitive is a verb-noun, as it partakes of the nature both of a verb and of a noun. In that it describes an action it is verbal, and in that it is the name of that action it is a substantival (i.e. a noun). Since it is verbal it can be the verb of a clause, but it can never be the main verb of a sentence...English possesses two verb-nouns: the Infinitive (e.g. to eat) and the Verb-noun in “ing” (e.g. eating). Both of these are translated by the Amharic Infinitive.

(Dawkins, 1969, p:53)

While Dawkins (1969) and Fantaye (1957) adamantly consider these constructions as infinitives, a number of other linguists stressed the nominal nature of the constructions.

Wolf Leslau, for example, in different places in his works mentioned the comparability of these constructions with the gerunds of English.

“The verbal noun as a nominal form can best be translated into English by the gerund ending in -ing. Thus *mə-sbər* may mean ‘The breaking’ or ‘The act of breaking’”(Leslau, 1967, p:253)¹

In the same manner, the renown Amharic linguist, Baye Yimam 1999 also uses the term “gerundives” to describe them.

In this section, I will briefly summarize both the clausal (infinitival) and nominal properties of these categories.

2.1 The infinitival(clausal) characteristics

Dawkins mentions the following reasons to consider the verbal nouns as infinitives:

- (7) (a) **translation:** they are used to translate the infinitives in English
- (b) **Eventive interpretation:** the gerundive “describes an action”

¹This paragraph is repeated in Leslau (1995, p:394) except the term “gerund” has been changed to “participle”.

(c) **Infinitive morpheme:** the presence of the prepositional infinitive marker such as *lə* that can prefix on the verbal nouns which appears quite similar to the English *to*.

- (8) *yosef lə-mə-mit'at yi-fəllig-al*
Josef to-CM-come wants.3ms
'Josef wants to come'

In addition to the reasons that Dawkins mentions, there are additional properties which seem to support the infinitive (clausal) analysis. I will briefly demonstrate them next.

2.1.1 Adverbial modifiers

Unlike nominal categories, the *mə*-nominals are modified by adverbials.

- (9) *[yə-yosef məkinayt-u-n bəfət'an mə-t'əgən] mariamn asdəsət-ə-at*
[of-Josef car-def-acc rapidly CM-repairing] Mary please-3msgS-3fsgO
'Josef's fast repairing the car pleased Mary'

Adjectives are illicit with the verbal nouns.

- (10) **[yə-yosef məkinayt-u-n fət'an mə-t'əgən] mariamn asdəsət-ə-at*
[of-Josef car-def-acc fast CM-repairing] Mary please-3msgS-3fsgO
'Josef's fast repairing the car pleased Mary'

2.1.2 Internal arguments

Like verbal clauses, *mə*-constructions can take internal arguments which are receivers of actions. Even if nouns are also sometimes argued to have internal arguments as well, it is normally the verbal elements that take the regular object arguments. This property of the verbal items is usually annotated as *+obj* contra to the *-obj* for nominal complements, (Jackendoff, 1977; Hale and Keyser, 1993). The fact that the verbal nouns take internal arguments is definitely an evidence that they display verbal properties.

- (11) *yə-yosef lijjitu-n mə-sam*
of-Josef girl-acc CM-kiss
'Josef's kissing of the girl...'

2.1.3 Structural Case

Just like regular transitive verbs, the verbal nouns assign structural case (accusative) to their internal objects. See the example above ((11)).

2.1.4 Conjunct agreement

The agreement test is a negative evidence. It involves the effect of the conjoined nominal subjects on the verbal agreement. Conjoined DP subjects trigger plural agreement on the verbs. Conjoined *mə*-constructions, however, don't trigger plural agreement. Compare the following two sentences.

- (12) lik'əmənber-u inna tsehafi-u silə-guday-u təwəyay-u
chairman-def and clerk-def about-issue-def discussed-pl
 'The chairman and the clerk discussed about the issue'
- (13) yə-yosef mə-mərək' inna yə-mariam mə-mələs asdəsət-ə(*u)-ñ
of-Josef CM-graduating and of-Mary CM-return please-3msgS(3pl)-1sgO
 'Josef's graduating and Mary's returning pleased me'

2.1.5 Verbal functional categories

There are a number of functional categories which are exclusively correlated with the clausal domain. Bybee (1985) lists the following:

- (a) valence: transitivity; causativity
- (b) voice: active, passive
- (d) aspect: perfective, imperfective
- (e) tense: present, past and future
- (f) mood : indicate, subjunctive, imperative, interrogative
- (g) agreement: person, number and gender

Many of these functional categories are available to the verbal nouns.

2.1.5.1 Transitivity :

In Amharic, regular intransitive predicates could be transitivized using the transitivizer head *a-* and the causativizer *as-*.

- (14) a. *mət'a* → *a-mət'a* → *as-mət'a*
 'he came' → 'he bring sth' → 'he made sb else to bring sth'

The example in (15) shows that the causativization (transitivization) is possible inside the *mə-*phrases.

- (15) *mə-mt'at* → *mə-a-mt'at* → *mə-as-mət'at*
 coming → bringing sth → causing someone to bring sth

2.1.5.2 Sentential Negation : Sentential negations are sometimes used to show the presence of clausal projection in a certain category. This is because sentential negations are supposed to project NegP projection above VP. The verbal nouns in Amharic take sentential Neg.

- (16) yə-yosef alə-mə-hed mariam-n asasəbat
Of-Josef Neg-CM-go Mary-acc bother
 'Josef's not going bothered Mary'

2.1.5.3 Voice : The verbal nouns can be passivized.

- (17) yə-yosef mariam-n mə-sam ← active
of-Josef Mary-acc CM-kiss

‘Josef’s kissing of Mary’

- (18) *yə-mariam bə-yosef mə-ə-sam* ← passive
of-Mary by-Josef CM-Pass-kiss
‘Mary’s being kissed by Josef’

2.1.5.4 Aspect : Aspect is a complex phenomena in Amharic clauses. The notion “aspect” is used at least in three different ways in Amharic clauses:

- Aktionsart of the verbs
- functional(grammatical) aspect
- verb form aspect

Aktionsart of the verbs is what is known in the literature as internal aspect (Smith, 1997). The functional notion of aspect, on the other hand, is known by the name “external aspect” or point of view aspect. The functional aspect is supposed to project an AspP projection in the VP spine. What is rather less acknowledged part of the Amharic verbal aspects is the verb form aspectual.

- (19) a. *ləbbəs* ← perfective form
b. *lbəs/ləbs* ← imperfective form

Simplifying it, the perfective are known by having a middle geminated consonant; and all the middle vowels. The imperfective verb form is the form of the verbs lacking one of the middle vowels and gemination.

The verb form aspectual is sometimes correlated (or, confused) with the external aspect (De-meke, 2003). But, the two are not always correlated. The imperfect grammatical aspect, the progressive, for example can appear with the perfective form of the verbs in Amharic. This means, the perfective verb form doesn’t always imply perfect aspect; and vice versa.

As already mentioned in the introduction, the verbal nouns are built on top of the imperfective verb forms. The grammaticalized aspect markers, like progressive, and prospective markers, nevertheless, cannot appear inside the verbal nouns.

- (20) **yə-yosef iyyə-mə-lbəs* (*mə-ıyyə-lbəs*)
of-Josef *prog-CM-wear* (*CM-prog-wear*)

For they are build on top of the imperfective verb forms, one might think that the verbal nouns have aspectual specification. For they avoid grammatical aspects like the progressive, on the contrary, they seem to lack aspectual features. Keeping the two aspectuals as distinct categories, both statements are amenable to each other. For my purpose, it suffices to say that verb form aspect is available in the verbal nouns, but not grammatical (external) aspect.

2.1.5.5 Tense : Tense in Amharic is overtly marked only in auxiliaries. Present tense is marked by a habitual auxiliary *al* and past tense is marked by a past tense marking auxiliary *nəbbər*. The verbal nouns can not appear with any of the tense marking auxiliaries. In all other cases, the presence or absence of tense feature in Amharic clauses is a highly contested issue.

2.1.5.6 Mood : Even if a serious investigation of the mood and modality in Amharic is still missing, from the cursory overview, one can easily see that the language has a number of irrealis mood markers. The first candidates are the complementizers such as *indi* and a *bi* which mark subjunctive mood. None of these mood markers can appear with the verbal nouns.

(21) bi-səbr nuro
irr-break would
'had he broke'

(22) *bi-mə-sbər
*irr-CM-wear

There are some other hypothetical mood markers such as *nəbbər* which also functions as the tense auxiliary. Whenever the auxiliary is functioning as mood marker, it can appear with the verbal nouns.

(23) lijjit-u-n mə-sam nəbbər
girl-def-acc kiss was
'(I) wish kissing the girl'

(23) is a grammatical sentence under the hypothetical reading. But, under the past tense reading, this kind of construction is impossible. The other element that marks the hypothetical mood is the complementizers *?ndə*.

(24) Aroge-u-n beyt ?ndə-mə-addəs ak'at'əl-ə-w
Old-def-Acc house Comp-Gur-renew burn-3msgS-3msgO.
'In stead of repairing the old house, he burn it down'

As these examples show, the hypothetical markers are compatible with the verbal nouns.

Like in English, (Chomsky, 1995, p:240), declarative main clauses take no overt mood markers in Amharic. Interrogatives are marked by a complementizer *?ndə*. In dependent clauses, declarative mood is marked by the same complementizer to that of the interrogatives-*?ndə*. The difference is, the complementizer appears in different positions in the declarative and interrogative moods. In declarative mood, the complementizer appears in pre-verbal position (pre-fixed to the verb) while in interrogative mood it appears in post-verbal position.

(25) yosef ?ndə-hed-ə səmma-hu
Josef comp-go-3msgS heard-1sS
'I heard that Josef left'

(26) yosef hed-ə ?ndə?
Josef go-3msgS comp
'Did Josef leave?'

The marker is the same with that of the subjunctive complementizer except that this one is in perfective form while the subjunctive complementizer has the imperfective form. The declarative/introgative complementizer *?ndə* is incompatible with the verbal nouns.

(27) *(yə)yosef(n) ?ndə-mə-hed-(u) səmahu
(of)-Josef(acc) comp-CM-(3msgS) heard-1sS

‘I heard that Josef left’(‘I heard Josef’s going’)

From this, I conclude that only hypothetical mood is compatible with the verbal nouns.

Table 1: Summary of the clausal characteristics of the Amharic verbal-nouns¹

Properties	verbal nouns
Causative	✓
Sentential Neg	✓
Take external arguments	✓
Assign structural case to their subjects	✓
Agree with their subjects	? ²
Adverbial modifiers	✓
Take internal arguments	✓
Assign Structural Case to their objects	✓
Agree with their objects	*
Serve as complements of CP-selecting verbs	✓
Support PRO subjects	✓
Coordinate agreement	*
Inflect for tense	*
voice alternations	✓
Appear with grammatical aspect markers	*
Take mood markers	#

1 Legend:

- ✓ = Yes
- * = No
- # = Partially Yes

2 They agree with the subjects. But, the agreement markers are not the regular subject agreement markers; rather possessive agreement markers.

(28) mariam hed-əčč
Mary go-3fs
 ‘Mary went.’

(29) yə-mariam mə-hed-wa
of-Mary CM-go-3fs.poss
 ‘Mary’s going’

As the first example shows, the standard third person feminine singular subject marker on the verbs is əčč. This morpheme is not available in the verbal noun agreement. The latter rather displays a possessive agreement, just like the agreement between nouns and their possessors.

2.2 The Nominal Characteristics

2.2.1 Argument Positions

Just like regular DP arguments, these constructions appear as subjects or objects of transitive verbs.

- (30) yə-mariam məkinayitun mə-t'əgən yosef-n asgərəm-ə-w
of-Mary car.the CM-repair Josef-acc amuse-3msgS-3msgO
'Mary's repairing the car amused Josef'

Argument positions are typically occupied by nominal categories (DP). The ability of the mə-clauses to appear in argument positions suggests that they have some level of nominal properties.

2.2.2 Complements of Prepositions

Not only do they occur in argument positions of verbs, these constructions also can function as complements of prepositions.

- (31) sila-məhed-wa awər-a
CM-going-3fsgS.poss talked-3msgS
'He talked about her going.'

2.2.3 Assign Inherent Case

Prototypical predicates such as verbs assign structural case to their arguments. In a nominative-accusative language like Amharic, a typical transitive verb assigns nominative case to its external argument. Nouns, on the other hand don't assign nominative case to their subjects (elements in their specifiers) such as possessors. Possessors (subjects of nominals) usually carry inherent cases such as genitive. Mə-clauses fall into two class on this matter. One class of verbal nouns assign nominative case to their subjects. Anticipating the classification of the verbal nouns in section 3, this class of verbal nouns are called *nomings*.

- (32) mariam məkinayitun mə-t'əgən-wa yosef-n asgərəm-ə-w (Noming)
Mary car.the CM-repair-3fsgS Josef-acc amuse-3msgS-3msgO
'Mary repairing the car amused Josef'

The other class of verbal nouns (possings) assign genitive case to their subjects.

- (33) yə-mariam məkinayitun mə-t'əgən yosef-n asgərəm-ə-w (Possing)
of-Mary car.the CM-repair Josef-acc amuse-3msgS-3msgO
'Mary's repairing of the car amused Josef'

2.2.4 Optionality of the external arguments

Verbs (in finite clauses) take subjects obligatorily—let it be a lexical noun, a pro or a PRO. Rothstein's Rule of Predicate Linking (1983) and subsequent stipulations of EPP in GB supposed to capture this fact about verbs. Nouns, or any other kind of nominal categories, however, don't

take subjects obligatorily. If there are subjects, like possessor DPs, they appear only optionally. The same goes with the *mə-nominals*. Even if these constructions can take lexical subjects as well as PRO subject, they can also remain subjectless.

- (34) Mə-nor məkam nəw
 CM-live great is
 ‘Living is great’ (= life is great)

2.2.5 Receive Structural Case

Receiving a structural case from transitive verbs is a typical property of nominal categories (DPs). The verbal nouns do so when they appear as internal arguments of transitive verbs.

- (35) [mariam yosef-n mə-sam-wa]-n Aster səmačč
 Mary Josef-acc CM-kiss-3mfs-acc Aster heard
 ‘Aster heard Josef’s kissing Mary’

2.2.6 Determiner

The definite article can occur on the verbal nouns only under certain syntactic environments; specifically with PRO subjects (when the verbal nouns are embedded under aspectual verbs).

- (36) [addis bet mə-srat-u] kəbbəd-ə-w
 new house CM-build-def challenge-3msgS-3msgO
 ‘Building a new house challenged him’

The occurrence of the definite article on the verbal nouns has already been observed from early on, at least as early as Dawkins’s work.

The availability of the definite article on the verbal nouns is another evidence for the nominal character of them. I will take the definite article as a crucial evidence for the presence of D-projection in these constructions.

Table 2: Summary of the nominal characteristics of Amharic verbal nouns

Properties	Verbal nouns
Determiners	#
Genitive Case subj	✓
Possessive agreement	✓
Of-complements	✓
Receives/requires structural case	✓
Complements of Ps	✓
Appear in argument positions	✓
NP deletion	✓

In the above sections, we have seen that the verbal nouns display the properties of verbs and nouns. I presented the typical verbal nouns to demonstrate their verbal and nominal charac-

teristics. The facts are nevertheless more complex than I represented above. The verbal nouns are not uniform across the board– some are more nominal than the others. There are at least three kinds of verbal nouns in Amharic each lying somewhere between the nominal and verbal paradigm.

3 The Kinds of Verbal-Nouns

In English, the verbal nouns (gerunds) are grouped into classes based on the case of their subjects. Gerunds which appear with accusative subjects are known as *accings*; and those appearing with possessive subjects are called *possings*. A related, but different kind of classification has already been proposed for Amharic verbal nouns too.

Manahlot (1977) classifies the verbal nouns into two based on their agreement with their subjects. A class of verbal nouns obligatorily agree with their subjects. Manahlot Demissie calls this class of verbal nouns “marked”. The other class avoids agreement, or do so optionally. He calls them “unmarked”.

3.1 The Marked Verbal Nouns

They have nominative subjects.

This class of verbal nouns are comparable with the *Accing* gerunds of English for the reason that the subject carries structural case. In addition to having nominative subjects, they are also different from the other classes in having obligatory possessive agreement on the nominal predicate. For the sake of parallelism with the English *Acc-ings*, I also use the term “nomings” to denote this class of verbal nouns.

(37) [yosef məkinayt-u-n mə-t’əgən-*(u)] mariamn asdəsət-ə-at
 [Josef car-def-acc CM-repairing-3msP] Mary please-3msgS-3fsgO
 ‘Josef’s repairing the car pleased Mary’

(38) [yosef məkinayt-u-n mə-t’əgən-*(u-n)] mariam səm-ač
 [of-Josef-n car-def-acc CM-repairing-3msP-acc] Mary heard-3fsgS
 ‘Mary heard Josef’s repairing the car’

3.2 The Unmarked Verbal Nouns

Like the English *Poss-ings*, they have possessive subjects. The verbal noun may or may not agree with the possessive subject. I use the terms “possings” and “unmarked” interchangeably for this class of verbal nouns. They are distinct from the marked class in a number of characteristics. Unlike the marked verbal nouns, PRO arguments are impossible in this group.

(39) *yə-mariam [PRO məkinayit-u-n mə-t’əgən] fəlləg-əčč
 of-Mary [PRO car-def-acc CM-repair] wanted-3fsgS
 ‘Mary’s wanted repairing the car’

As illustrated in the example (38), when the *noming* verbal nouns appear as internal arguments of transitive verbs, the accusative case marks the lexical verb. But, if *possings* appear as objects of transitive verbs, the accusative case targets the possessive subject rather than the verbal noun

itself. They appear as argument of a transitive verb, the possessive marked subject also carries the accusative marker, (41).

- (40) [yə-yosef məkinayt-u-n mə-t'əgən] mariam-n asdəsət-ə-at cf.(37)
 [of-Josef car-def-acc CM-repairing] Mary-acc please-3msgS-3fsgO
 'Josef's repairing the car pleased Mary'
- (41) [yə-yosef-n məkinayt-u-n mə-t'əgən] mariam səm-ač cf.(38)
 [of-Josef-n car-def-acc CM-repairing] Mary heard-3fsgS
 'Mary heard Josef's repairing the car'

The other, though less salient, distinction between the unmarked verbal nouns and the marked ones on their relationship with sentential adverbs. The sentential adverb sounds slightly better with the nomings than the possings.

- (42) *yə-yosef minalbat mə-hed mariam-n asfərat
 Of-Josef probably CM-go Mary-acc bother
 'Josef's probably going bothered Mary'
- (43) ??yosef minalbat mə-hed-u mariam-n asfərat
 Josef probably CM-go-3ms.poss Mary-acc bother
 'Josef probably going bothered Mary'

To summarize, there are at least four important distinctions between the nomings and the possings:

- (a) **The case markings of the subjects:** Nomings have nominative subject while possings have yə-marked (possessive) subjects.
- (b) **Lexical subjects:** PRO subjects are supported in Nomings; but not in possings
- (c) **The Possessive agreement on the verbal nouns:** the agreement marker is obligatory on the Nomings while it is optional or even illicit on the possings.
- (d) **The position of the accusative case:** when the verbal noun clause is the object of a transitive verb, it receives an accusative case from the verb. In this case, the accusative marker targets the (yə-marked) subject in the possings while it occurs on the head of the verbal noun in the nomings.
- (e) **Sentential adverbs:** they are slightly better with the Nomings than Possings

Based on the properties of the verbal nouns that I presented in section 2, the first property is related with the nominal properties while the latter three are related with the verbal properties. That means, the major difference between the two kinds of verbal nouns lies on their clausal properties, not on the nominal side. Look at the summaries of section 2 once more in here, for the sake of the comparison of the two kinds of verbal nouns.

Table 3: Comparing the two types of gerundives

Properties	Noming	Possing
Mood	*	*
Tense	*	*
Grammatical aspect	*	*
Voice	✓	✓
Causative	✓	✓
Sentential Neg	✓	✓
Sentential adverbs	??	*
take Obligatory Subject	✓	*
assign Structural Case to Subject	✓	*
Subject agreement	✓	?
Adverbial modifiers	✓	✓
Take direct object complements	✓	✓
Assign Structural Case to their obj	✓	✓
Object agreement	*	*
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Determiners	?✓	?✓
Quantifiers	*	*
Pluralization	*	*
Adjectives	*	*
Agreement	*	*
Genitive Case subj	*	✓
Possessive agreement	?	✓
Of-complements	*	*
Receives/requires structural case	✓	✓
Complements of Ps	✓	✓
Appear in argument positions	✓	✓

We will see what ramifications these distinctions have on these classes of verbal noun. Overall, the general patterns look like the nomings have more clausal properties than the possings, and the possings have more nominal properties.

3.3 The Prepositional Verbal Nouns

All the examples we have in the above two classes of verbal nouns is where the clauses headed by the verbal noun appearing as an argument of a verb. This is a class what Dawkins call the “The substantive infinitives”. The other class is what he calls the “adverbial infinitives”.

This is kind of verbal noun where the prepositional element *lə* is prefixed on the verbal noun; and the main function of the verbal noun is mainly adverbial; that is, to modify the event. Dawkins considers this class of verbal nouns the same category with the English infinitives mainly due to the resemblance of the prepositional prefixes.

- (44) *misa-u-n* *lə-mə-blət hed-ə*
lunch-3msg.poss-acc to-CM-eat went-3msgS
‘He went to eat his lunch’

What is attractive on comparing the Amharic verbal nouns with the English infinitives, in Dawkins' view, is the curious fact that the dative marker elements are also infinitive markers in both of the languages. Manahlot (1977) dismisses Dawkins's correlation of the two as mere "confusion". Even if his dismissal seems appropriate to a large extent, as there are a number of reasons not to correlate the two constructions, there are some points that vindicate Dawkins.

Like the English infinitives, and unlike their Amharic "substantive" counterparts, the prepositional verbal nouns do not take lexical nouns as their external arguments (even if they can take internal arguments) of their own even when they are selected by verbs which allow lexical subjects.

- (45) *yosef mariam məkinaytun lə-mət'əgən-wa-n fəlləg-ə-(w)
Josef Mary car-def-acc to-CM-repair-3fsP-acc want-3msgS-3msgO
 'Josef wanted Mary' repairing the car'

Nor can the external argument trigger agreement with verbal noun.

- (46) *yosef məkinayt-u-n lə-mə-t'əgən-u fəlləg-ə
Josef car-def-acc to-CM-repair-3msP wanted-3msgS
 'Josef wanted to repair the car'

There are, nevertheless, some differences between the prepositional verbal nouns and infinitives of English.

First, unlike the *to* marker of the English infinitives which seem a neutral alternate, the prepositional element in Amharic verbal nouns, however, bring about some distinctive properties to the nominal clause. Being an adverbial, it adds a *purposive* interpretation to the clause.

The prepositional verbal nouns whenever functioning as adjuncts can appear as complements of all kinds of predicates. Their interpretations is distinctively adverbial as they add a sense of reason or purpose.

- (47) yosef lə-məsrat heda
Josef to-CM-work went-3msgS
 'Josef went for working'

Note, however, that not every *lə*-marked verbal noun is adverbial. Certain classes of verbs such as *aspectual* and *desiderative* verbs take the gerundive complements with the *lə*-prefix.

- (48) yosef məkinaytun lə-mə-t'əgən mōkkər-ə
Josef car-def-acc to-CM-repair tried-3msgS
 'Josef tried to repair the car'

In this case, the prepositional prefix is not a free alternate. It is possible only under certain class of selector predicates. Perception and communication verbs, for example, cannot take the nominal clause as their complements with the prepositional prefix, as the following example shows.

- (49) *yosef (mariam) məkinaytun lə-mə-t'əgən(-wa-n) səmma
Josef (Mary) car-def-acc to-repair(-3fsP-acc) heard.3msgS
 'Josef heard Mary to repair the car'
- (50) *yosef (mariam) məkinaytun lə-mət'əgən(-wa-n) azəz-ə
yosef (Mary) car-def-acc to-repair (3fsP-acc) order-3msgS
 'yosef ordered Mary to repair the car'

Non-eventive (generic) verbal nouns can not also take the prepositional prefix.

- (51) *sira-w beyt lə-mə-t'ræg nəw
job-his house to-CM-clean is
 'his job is cleaning house'

(from [Manahlot \(1977\)](#))

The *lə* marked verbal nouns can not also appear in argument positions (as subjects and objects of transitive verbs), as [Dawkins \(1969\)](#) noted.

- (52) *(yə)mariam məkinaytun lə-mə-t'əgən asdəsət-ə-n
(of)Mary car-def-Acc LÄ-CM-repair please-3msgS-1P
 'Mary('s) repairing the car pleased us'

These peculiar properties make them difficult to treat them in line with the regular (substantive) verbal nouns. The research on the adverbial verbal nouns is still lacking not only in Amharic but also in English. I am afraid the same is true with the current study. I am going to focus on the 'substantive' nominals.

4 The categorial Status of the Verbal Nouns

Even if the presence of a limited number of syntactic categories is well established beginning from ancient Greek, determining the categorial class of a certain construction is has never been a straightforward task. Putting linguistic objects into categories is one of the prime tasks of the linguistic science because these categories are main inputs in the investigation of the structural patterns. Unless proper categories can be framed, a systematic investigation on the linguistic constructions merely impossible. And, more importantly, for theoretical linguistics, having some agreeable, limited syntactic categories is a crucial step to develop theories which give sense not only to the grammar of a language, but for that of all the languages which we invasion to ultimately understand.

One of the major challenges in theoretical linguistics is lack of a common meta language that all the linguists working across various languages and linguistic traditions could communicate on. For a traditional linguist (structuralist) working on an American language, what terminology a certain semanticist might use to describe a certain category is not an issue. The structuralist could call "gerund" for the same category that the semanticist calls "infinitive". Thus far as they have no common goals, there is no fundamental reason to attempt to have a coherent and unified means of categorizing SOs.

But, for theoretical linguistics, non-uniform classification has detrimental effect because our object is unified—to work out a universal and coherent grammar that could explain the regularities and irregularities of the human language. Unless we have principled mechanism of classification, we might be talking about different categories while we think we are talking about the same; and vice versa. For that end, there is an urgent need for having consistent tools of classifying syntactic categories. Do we have such tools right now? Can we surely know if a certain construction in a language X is an infinitive, a gerund, or a derived noun?

Unfortunately, the answer for these questions is a resounding “no” Baker (2008); Haspelmath (2020, 2021a,b). With a few exceptions (Baker’s 2003 attempt develop constrained principles to identify verbs from nouns and adjectives, for example), these questions are rarely asked, let alone answered. While one can easily find hundreds, even thousands of publications discussing the infinitives or gerunds of language X, or Y, it is rare to find linguists asking the very foundational questions of what infinitives/gerunds ‘are’ in the first place, and how they differ from other categories. What most linguists work with is by creating analogies between well studied languages (which used to be Latin, and now is English) and less studied languages, and then apply the categories developed for the well studied languages on the less studied languages.

This methodology is known to have foundational flaw. It forces the linguist working on the less studied languages to apply the quirks and language internal idiosyncrasies on the less studied language. Ideally, what we need is a broad survey of categorial patterns, and developing some testable & falsifiable diagnostics. Once these diagnostics have been tested over a large number of data, across many languages, and survive the scrutiny, they can be used as general frame of reference for further studies. But, this kind of study needs a lot of work, and collaboration of linguists working on different array of languages.

Since, I have no resource to do that, what I am going to do here, tentatively, is compare the verbal nouns of Amharic and English, and finally come up with general principles (diagnostics) to differentiate gerundives from other categories, more importantly infinitives.

4.1 Infinitives?

In the above sections, I have mentioned that the dominant view (the textbook standard) in the current Amharic linguistics is to consider the verbal nouns as infinitives. Still, the questions nobody raised, let alone answered, are *what are infinitives in the first place?* Given their hybrid nature, *do the verbal nouns in Amharic qualify for infinitive-hood?*

What are infinitives? and how are they different from non-infinitive dependent clauses (both nominalized and non-nominalized)? These are more general problems which go beyond the grammar of Amharic or English.

The *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (2011) defines infinitives as “a traditional term for the non-finite form of the verb usually cited as its unmarked or base form, e.g. *go, walk, kick*”. This is a good starting point, but insufficient even just for English itself. Are all infinitives unmarked? are all unmarked verbs infinitives? We know for sure that none of these questions have an affirmative answer. European Portuguese, for instance, is known for its inflected infinitives (Nikolaeva, 2007).

Even if we take the assumption that infinitives are unmarked verbs for grant, there a number of other issues which still obfuscating the notion of the infinitive. The most urgent of these for the current purpose is the question on how to differentiate them from other unmarked verb-like categories like gerunds and deverbal nominals.

Nobody has come up with a clear definition or criteria of distinguishing infinitives from other verb-like categories such as gerunds and deverbal nouns yet. The classification, and hence, the terminology linguists use in the linguistics of many of the languages rather seems to follow traditions rather than independent criteria of class-hood. Amharic is not an exception. The use of the term “infinitive” seems to come to Amharic via the Latin linguistic tradition. The first Amharic linguists, which were also Latinists to some extent, seem to be influenced by the nominal nature of infinitives in Latin to directly apply the terminology on Amharic. Without due consideration, then, the modern Amharic linguists, the majority of them, maintain the traditional terminology. If not for that tradition, the use of the term “infinitive” for the verbal nouns of Amharic, in my view, is incorrect and misleading at worse. Why is so?

The crucial insight came from Michael Noonan’s (2007) characterization of infinitives. Acknowledging the absence of a clear criteria of identifying infinitives from a cross-linguistic perspective, he postulated three fundamental properties of infinitives which he considers them to make infinitives distinct from other non-finite verbal categories such as verbal nouns. He establishes three areas where one kind of (verbal) category can be distinguished from the other:

- (53) Diagnostics for infinitives
- a. the nature of their **relation** with their structural arguments
 - b. the **morphology** of category
 - c. the **distribution** of the category in a sentence

Based on these diagnostics, he identified the following characteristics to be typical of infinitives:

- They “don’t bear syntactic relation to their notional subjects”. This is to mean that the subjects of the infinitives don’t receive structural cases such as nominative from the infinitives nor do they take genitive case; and the infinitives don’t reflect verbal agree with the subjects. He also mentions that, even if they fail to establish relations with their subjects, they do behave like regular verbs in relation to their objects.
- In their morphology, infinitives are like regular verbs. Even if their lack of verbal inflection has received a lot of attention in English linguistics, Noonan stresses, infinitives actually inflect for all kinds of verbal categorial features such as tense, voice, aspect and object agreement. Even under these conditions, it is also important to acknowledge that the infinitives tend to carry less number of functional items than their finite counterparts. In addition, they never have been shown to inflect for mood in any language.
- In their distribution, infinitives are sub-ordinate clauses; hence, might appear with complementizers. Aspectual verbs typically take infinitives as their complements.

From the above characterizations, one can easily note that these properties are really not exclusive to the infinitives themselves. They encompass the majority of non-finite verbal structures. The second and third points specially, span all across non-finite clauses including gerundive constructions. This is mainly because infinitives are known by their negative properties (lack of some properties of finite verbs). Therefore, focusing on Noonan’s first few points, I then tentatively refine the parameters.

- (54) Defining characteristics of infinitives (refined)

- (a) First and for most, *they are non-finite*: in the sense that they carry less inflectional materials in contrast to their finite counterparts; plus they lack mood feature.
- (a) *They are subordinates*; they appear as complements of CP-selecting verbs, and might appear with complementizers.
- (a) *They do not contain complete clauses*
 - (i) they don't license R-expression subjects (their arguments are co indexed with another clause)
 - (ii) they don't assign structural case to the subject
- (a) *They are clausal* in the sense that
 - (i) they don't assign genitive case to their subjects
 - (ii) they cannot be marked with articles
 - (iii) cannot receive structural case from the CATPs
 - (iv) cannot be complements of prepositions

The question is then how many of these characteristics are able correctly filter out the verbal nouns from the infinitives. For the sake of comparison, I will include the prototypical infinitives in Amharic such as the *lə*-clauses and that of English.

Table 4: The nominal characteristics of Amharic verbal nouns

Properties	infinitives (universal)	infinitives (Eng)	lə-clauses (Amh)	mə-clauses	
				Nomings	Possings
Have less inflections than their finite counterparts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Occur as complements of CATPS	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Don't assign structural cases to their subjects	✓	✓	✓	*	✓
Don't assign genitive Case to their subjects	✓	✓	✓	✓	*
May assign structural case to their objects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Appear with complementizers	?✓	?✓	?✓	?✓	?✓
Lack mood feature	✓	✓	✓	*	*
cannot be marked with articles	✓	✓	✓	*	*
cannot receive accusative case from the CATPs	✓	✓	✓	*	*
cannot be complements to prepositions	✓	✓	✓	*	*

These tests are developed based on Noonan's observation on the behaviors of infinitives at a cross-linguistic level. But, adding some of the well known features of the gerundives makes it easier to cross-cut the distinctions between infinitives and verbal nouns.

Of the tests in here, probably the lack of nominal property of the infinitives might sound trivially true. But, it has been known across Romance and some Germanic languages that the infinitives display a number of nominal properties. Putting the Spanish or Italian into the above tests, the nominal infinitives would probably pass most of them.

Zucchi (1993) for example mentions that the nominal infinitives in Italian: are modified by adjectives, take *of* subjects, combine with determiners and appear in argument positions. These are definitely nominal characteristics. But, the questions is, are these real infinitives, or are we following just traditions to consider them as such?

In my view, the correct approach seems to be taken by Roland (2006) in his proposal for considering the infinitives in German as gerunds.

As the table illustrates, each class of the verbal nouns of Amharic failed some of the tests while the prototypical infinitives both in Amharic and English pass all of them. Even if we cannot definitely dismiss the possibility, the tests are suggestive that the verbal nouns fall outside of the scope of infinitive-hood. Intuitively too, the verbal nouns seem too nominal for an infinitive. Therefore, it seems sound to conclude that the verbal nouns are non-infinitive. From this, I conclude that the *mə* clauses in Amharic are too nominal to be classified as infinitives.

4.2 The Verbal Nouns as Gerunds

Abney at some point mentions that gerunds are rare phenomena across languages. He might be right that gerunds are rare. But, it is also possible that they are tagged by different denominations in various linguistic traditions that they give the impression of rarity. In this section, I want to stress that the verbal nouns of Amharic are indeed gerunds, enriching Abney's inventory of languages with gerunds from two (he mentioned Turkish and English only) to three. I will explain that the clausal and nominal properties (hybrid features) of the verbal nouns we look at in the above sections is typical of gerunds cross-linguistically. For the scarcity of much literature on gerunds², though our comparison will be restricted to the English.

Again, the crucial and difficult step is to know how gerundives can be differentiated from other related similar constructions. Here, we have English as the sole important source of characterizing gerund-hood. Thankfully, there is rich literature developed around the English gerunds going as far as 1960's.

From the very beginning, the gerunds are identified as a kind of nominalizations. (Lees, 1960, p:65) classifies the *ing*-nominalizations into two:

- (55) (a) *ing*-nominalization which function as concrete nouns like *the tall building*
- (b) *ing*-nominalizations which denote event

He further subclassifies the latter group into two:

- (56) (a) *Action Nominalizations*: “refers to an action, a way of doing something”
- (b) *Gerundive Nominalizations*: which “refer to a fact”

Lees study inaugurated the foundations of the analysis and theory of gerunds to come in the GB literature. Most of the subsequent works take his classifications for granted and work to develop an analysis to them. But what an important point we want to take from Lees theory is that **gerunds are types of nominalizations**. This concept itself offers a useful insight on what gerunds are, and how they could be distinguished from other related categories.

Indeed, there are a number of many other characteristics of gerundives which have been identified since then.

Three kinds of gerundives are well-known in English—possings, accings and *ing*-ofs are latter identified and refined by Abney (1987).

Ing-ofs or action nominals are almost uncontroversially nominals of all as they display almost all the typical properties that a lexical noun displays. They are identified by the *of* preposition

²In the history of Amharic linguistics, the term “gerund” has been used to denote what we now call the *coverbs*. Even if the term has slowly given away to “coverbs” in most works lately, to avoid confusion between the two constructions, I will rather use the term “gerundive” to express the verbal nouns hereafter.

appearing with the internal arguments.

(57) Mary's fast repairing of the car impressed the customers.

They are derived nominals. Ross's squashy sequence of gerundives puts them at the end of the clausal spectrum. Since Chomsky (1970), these categories are generally taken as regular, derived nominals. They appear in a syntactic positions that regular nouns appear; take all kinds of modifiers and determiners that nouns take—adjectives, demonstratives, articles etc. Since Chomsky argued to generate their derivation with the lexicon; rather than the narrow transformational system, most of the subsequent works don't attribute any special relevance to these categories (Gary, 2006; Milsark, 1988). Since they are much more nominal than the verbal nouns of Amharic, for they are modified by adjectives, demonstratives and all kinds of nominal modifiers, I don't consider them in here.

But, possings and accings are true hybrid categories because they display the properties of both nouns and verbs.

- (58)
- (a) cannot be complements of psych and raising verbs (59-a)–(59-b)
 - (b) appear as complements of prepositions (59-d)–(59-e)
 - (c) take internal arguments (60-a)
 - (d) determiners and quantifiers are ruled out (60-b)
 - (e) adverbial modifiers are licensed (60-c)
 - (f) pluralization is impossible (60-d)

- (59)
- a. We were amazed [that they left the city].
 - b. *We were amazed [their leaving the city].
 - c. *We were amazed [their decision].
 - d. We talked about [their leaving the city].
 - e. *We talked about [that they are leaving the city].

- (60)
- a. Leaving the city is difficult.
 - b. *The (some) leaving the city is difficult.
 - c. Their leaving the city quickly surprised everyone.
 - d. *Leaving the city and joining the army were...

The accings are the most clausal of the three as recognized by their accusative subjects. They are usually assumed to have the whole projection of the VP-spine (Reuland, 1983). The possings fall in between the accings and the *of-ings*.

In the following subsections, I am going to compare the verbal nouns with the gerunds of English to determine the categorial status of the former category.

4.2.1 Possings

What I called “possings” of Amharic verbal nouns are similar category with the possings of English. From the three well-known classes of gerundives of English, the possings are taken to be the most canonical gerundives. Therefore, I will start the comparison of the verbal nouns of Amharic with the possessing gerunds of English.

4.2.1.1 Distribution As virtually all the linguists who looked at the structure of gerunds witness, gerunds are nominal in their external distributions; while they contain a number of verbal properties internally.

A typical gerund appears in argument positions of transitive verbs. As shown in the following sentences, gerunds appear as subjects, (61-a) and objects of transitive verbs (61-b) as well as complements of prepositions (61-c)–(61-d), in contrast to verbal clauses (61-d).

- (61) a. [Mary's leaving the city] impressed Josef
 b. Josef liked [Mary's leaving the city]
 c. Josef talked about [Mary's leaving the city]
 d. *Josef talked about [that Mary is leaving the city]

As I have explained in section 2, all these characteristics are true of the Amharic verbal nouns.

- (62) [yə-mariam mə-hed] yosef-n goda-w (cf. (61-a))
 [of-Mary CM-go] Josef-acc hurt-3msgO
 'Mary's leaving traumatized Josef'
- (63) yosef [yə-mariam-n mə-hed] adənnək'ə (cf. (61-b))
 Josef [of-Mary-acc CM-go] appreciate-3msgS
 'Josef appreciated Mary's going'
- (64) yosef silə-(yə)-mariam məhed awər-a (cf. (61-d))
 Josef about-of-Mary CM-go talk-3msgS
 'Josef talked about Mary's going'

4.2.1.2 Internal properties Gerunds display some internal properties of nouns. Pullum (1991) listed three properties of the possings which set them on the side of nouns.

The first involves the optionality of the subject. While subjects are generally obligatory in clauses, possessors subjects of nouns are optional. The optionality of the subjects in the gerundives makes them look like the regular possessive NPs, rather than clausal subjects.

The second property involves the possessive clitic marker -'s. Regular clauses take nominative subjects and other kinds of clauses could take accusative subjects too. Just like possessive NPs, the poss-ings in English, however, take subjects marked by the possessive clitic.

- (65) [Josef's leaving the city] amazed the guests

Both of the above facts of the English possings are true of the Amharic ones too.

- (66) (yə-yosef) kətəma-u-n mə-lik'ək' yəsgərmal
 of-Josef city-def-acc CM-leave surprising
 'Josef's leaving the city was surprising'

The third property of the possings that Pullum raised deals with preposed adverbs. Preposed adverbs are allowed in clauses while blocked in noun phrases. Possings pattern with the nouns

in this case as well.

- (67) a. They say that[you left without a word] (Pullum's 3–4)
b. They say that [without a word, you left]
- (68) a. They resent[your having left without a word]
b. *They resent [without a word, your having left]

Quite interestingly, the preposing of adverbs is also blocked in Amharic poss-ings:

- (69) a. [yosef bət'am bət'awat ?ndə-hedə] nəgəruñ
b. [bət'am bət'awat yosef ?ndə-hedə] nəgəruñ
- (70) a. [yə-yosefn bət'am bə-t'wat məhed] alwədədkutm
b. *[bət'am bə-t'wat yə-yosefn məhed] alwədədkutm

In both of the languages, the adverbs can precede the subjects in clauses, but not in possessing gerundives. There could be reasons why adverbial preposing is blocked in gerundives—nobody so far came up with the solution for this problem even if the observation has been reduplicated in a number of works at least for English.

I also hasten to add, of course, that gerunds canonically:

- (71) (a) avoid demonstratives and quantifiers (73) & (72-a)
(b) are modified by adverbials (74) & (72-b)
(c) cannot be pluralized (75) & (72-c)
- (72) a. Their *that (*some) leaving the city is difficult
b. Their leaving the city quickly surprised everyone
c. Their *leavings the city
- (73) yə-yosef *ya (*tinnish') kətəma-u-n mə-lik'ək' yasgərmal (cf. (72-a))
of-Josef *that (*some) city-def-acc CM-leave surprising
- (74) yə-yosef bəfit'nət kətəma-u-n mə-lik'ək' yasgərmal (cf. (72-b))
of-Josef quickly city-def-acc CM-leave surprising
'Josef's quickly leaving the city is surprising'
- (75) * yə-yosef kətəma-u-n mə-lik'ək'-očč (cf. (72-c))
of-Josef city-def-acc CM-leave-pl

Table 5: Comparing the possings of Amharic with that of English

Properties	Poss-ing (Eng)	Possing (Amh)
Modals	*	*
Tense Auxs	*	*
Aspect	✓	*
Voice	✓	✓
Causative	✓	✓
Sentential Neg	✓	✓
Sentential adverbs	*	??
take Obligatory Subject	*	*
assign Structural Case to Subject	*	*
Subject agreement	*	?
Adverbial modifiers	✓	✓
Take direct object complements	✓	✓
Assign Structural Case to their obj	✓	✓
Object agreement	–	*
Determiners	*	?
Quantifiers	*	*
Pluralization	*	*
Adjectives	*	*
Agreement	✓	*
Genitive Case subj	✓	✓
Poss agr	–	✓
Of-complements	–	*
Receives/requires structural case	✓	✓
Complements of Ps	✓	✓
Appear in argument positions	✓	✓

The facts on the English gerunds are collected from various sources mainly from [Abney \(1987\)](#); [Milsark \(1988\)](#); [Gary \(2006\)](#); [Pires \(2001\)](#); [Chomsky \(1970\)](#).

As is evident from the table, the poss-ings of the Amharic behave almost exactly the same to that of English. The poss-ings in both of the languages fall somewhere between clauses (VP) and nouns (DPs). As one can see from the table, the criteria that the poss-ings of Amharic fulfill is almost always the same with that of the English poss-ings.

The only two areas where the possings of the two languages don't exactly match are:

- (a) *Aspect*: that the possings of Amharic don't take grammatical aspectual markers
- (a) *Conjunction Agreement*: Conjoined possings denote plural nominal in English while it this is impossible in Amharic possings.

I will attempt to explain these distinctions of the possings in the second part of the paper. But, for now, it suffices to mention that the difference are minor; and rather the commonalities surpass their differences that the possings in both languages should belong to the same syntactic(lexical) class.

All the above common properties cannot't be a mere coincidence. They confirms not only that the poss-ings of Amharic should be treated in line with the poss-ings of English but also call for a explanation why poss-ings behave similar cross-linguistically.

4.2.2 Nomings

These are the most clausal of the two kinds of verbal-nouns in Amharic. Most of the arguments for the infinitival nature of the verbal-nouns come from this class due to their clausal properties. In this section, I will show that the Nomings of Amharic are comparable to the Acc-ings of English; and conclude that they too should be considered as gerundives; not infinitives. I use the cover term *clausal gerundives* to denote the nomings of Amharic and the Acc-ings of English

Not to bore the reader with example sentences from both languages, here I simply present the core findings in the form of summary.

Table 6: Comparing Nomings of Amharic with the Accings of English

Properties	Acc-ing (Eng)	Noming (Amh)
Modals	*	*
Tense Auxs	*	*
Aspect	✓	*
Voice	✓	✓
Causative	✓	✓
Sentential Neg	✓	✓
Sentential adverbs	✓	?
take Obligatory Subject	✓	✓
assign Structural Case to Subject	✓	✓
Subject agreement	*	?
Adverbial modifiers	✓	✓
Take direct object complements	✓	✓
Assign Structural Case to their obj	✓	✓
Object agreement	–	*
Determiners	*	?
Quantifiers	*	*
Pluralization	*	*
Adjectives	*	*
Agreement	*	*
Genitive Case subj	*	*
Poss agr	–	?
Of-complements	–	*
Receives/requires structural case	✓	✓
Complements of Ps	✓	✓
Appear in argument positions	✓	✓

Clausal gerundives are predominantly clausal constructions. As one can see from the table 6,

they checked only three of the 11 criteria of noun-hood; but passed the majority of the tests of the clause-hood (10 out of 14). The table contains no absolute nor an exhaustive criteria of categorization. But, it can give a general, I believe, glimpse of the nature of these constructions. What is rather important to my purpose is the correspondence of the criteria that the CGs (clausal gerunds) of the two languages.

- (76) Like DPs, the CGs in both languages:
- (a) appear as arguments of transitive verbs
 - (b) receive structural cases from their selector predicates
 - (c) could come as complements of prepositions
- (77) Like clauses, they:
- (a) assign structural case to their subjects
 - (b) take direct object complements
 - (c) assign structural case to their objects

I am not going to list down all the clausal properties that CGs display. The important point here is to notice that the difference between the Nomings of Amharic and the Acc-ings of English lies only on very few points:

- (78) (a) **Aspect:** English Acc-ings may take Aspect markers; while the Amharic gerundives lack them. This is similar to the case with the possings.
- (b) **Subject agreement:** The accusative subject fails to trigger agreement on the gerundive head in English while the nominative subjects do agree in Amharic gerundives. Admittedly, the subject agreement in CGs, in Amharic, is not the true subject agreement marker available in clauses. It is rather the possessive agreement marker that occurs on the gerundive heads. The failure of the agreement in English Acc-ings is probably due to the absence of possessive agreement in the language.

That all means, with the exception of grammatical aspect, clausal gerunds in Amharic are exactly similar in their nominal and clausal characteristics with that of the Acc-ings of English.

4.2.3 Defining Features of Gerunds

The important point is not how many check-marks a certain category gets. Rather, we need to have a certain defining criteria for a certain construction to be classified under the gerund category.

Summarizing the points we talked about in the above sections, what is common nominal properties for both Acc-ings and Poss-ings could be summed in two major notions; they appear in argument positions of transitive verbs and function as objects of prepositions. Their appearance in argument position could be stated as the main reason for them to receive structural case. On the clausal side, at least three properties can be listed out as common features of all the gerundives—they take internal arguments (objects); assign structural cases to their internal arguments and take adverbial modifiers.

Therefore, I am proposing the following features as the defining properties of gerundive constructions cross-linguistically, again following [Michael \(2007\)](#).

- They are clausal:
 1. They are **modified by adverbs**; rather than adjectives and quantifiers
 2. They **take direct objects** complements
 3. **Assign structural case to their complements.** DPs (nouns) cannot assign case to their complements. Hence, their complements come with oblique case introduced by a linker element (*of* for English; *yə* for Amharic). The gerundives, on the other hand, can directly assign accusative case to their object complements.
- They are nominal:
 1. They **appear in argument positions** of transitive verbs (hence, receive structural cases themselves)
 2. They receive structural case from their selector predicates
 3. They function as **complements of prepositions**
 4. They assign genitive (inherent) case to their arguments
 5. Possessive agreement with their arguments

The first three features are what makes gerunds distinct from regular DPs; and the second group of features are what makes them distinct from regular clauses (VPs)—hence, gerunds being neither DPs nor VPs (contra to the functionalist view that gerunds being both DPs and VPs (Baker, 2005)).

Returning to the issue raised above, one can easily note, the clausal characteristics of the gerundives are also shared by the infinitives.

Table 7: Infinitives vs Gerunds

Properties	infinitives (universal)	Gerunds (universal)
Have less inflections than their finite counterparts	✓	✓
Appear with complementizers	✓	*
Occur as complements of CP-selecting (aspectual) verbs	✓	✓
Don't assign structural cases to their subjects	✓	#
Don't assign genitive Case to their subjects	✓	*
May assign structural case to their objects	✓	✓
Appear with complementizers	✓	*
Adverbial modifiers	✓	✓
Take direct objects	✓	✓
Assign structural case to their objects	✓	✓
Appear in argument positions	✓	✓
Receive structural case	*	✓
Serve as complements of prepositions	*	✓
Assign genitive(inherent) case to their arguments	*	✓

Both gerunds and infinitives are a class of non-finite clauses. They are similar in that respect. But, they are still distinct. The infinitives are typically characterized by their negative feature–

their lack of a number of properties that their finite counter parts possess. Gerunds, on the other hand, are characterized by positive properties; for they encompass a number of verbal as well as nominal characteristics. In other words, the last three tests are what makes gerunds truly distinct from infinitives, which all emanate from their nominal property:

Based on this, I propose that the following three characteristics make gerunds distinct from other categories, including infinitives.

(79)

- (a) Like DPs, they are able to **receive structural cases** from their selector predicates
- (b) Like DPs, they serve as complements of prepositions
- (c) Like nouns, they assign genitive case to their arguments

4.2.3.1 Receive structural case The first to meant to show that the well-known Case Filter (Vergnaud, 1977) applies to gerunds. Like DPs, gerunds appear in case positions. This not always true for infinitives. Take the ECM constructions in English for example. The transitive verb *believe* has an accusative case (and a theta-role) to discharge³. In the infinitive complement (80), the case is discharged to the subject; implying that the infinitive clause as a whole receives no case; while in the gerund complements, the subject doesn't receive case from the ECM predicate. Hence, we can say that, the whole gerundive clause is receiving the accusative case.

- (80)
- a. John believes him to go
 - b. John believes his going

Infinitives also can occur as complements of predicate adjectives which cannot assign case to their complements. In such contexts, gerunds are illicit.

- (81)
- a. Today, it is unlikely to rain
 - b. *Today, it is unlikely raining

4.2.3.2 Complements of prepositions The second point comes from the empirical observation of the cross-linguistic data. Gerunds, as nominalized (DP) projections, tend to serve as complements of prepositions while infinitives do not.

- (82)
- a. John believes in his going
 - b. *John believes in him going

4.2.3.3 Genitive case/possessive agreement Noonan contends that the relationship of the nominalizations (gerunds being one type of nominalizations) with their arguments as “The most important feature” distinguishing them from other classes of complements. As such, the fact that gerundives assign genitive case and/or trigger possessive agreement with their arguments

³Note that I am assuming Higginbotham's theta criterion in which the theta assigners and their theta roles are supposed to have a one-to-one correspondence.

- Every thematic position is discharged
- If X discharges a thematic role in Y, then it discharges only one

. (Higginbotham, 1985, p:561)

is the core distinguishing property of gerunds from other non-gerund categories. According to Noonan, the subjects of nominalizations typically carry genitive case while the case of the objects considerably varies from language to language. It is also necessary to emphasize that possessive agreement and genitive case are two faces of the same coin, (Michael, 2007; Szabolcsi, 1994). Possessive agreement is a reflex of agreement between two nominal categories; just like genitive case is a reflex of the relationship between two nominal categories (Chomsky, 1986). Note that not all languages have genitive case. In that kind of situations, what we called *genitive* case has to be replaced by a “prepositional” *of*-relations (Spencer (2008) and the references in there on the relation between genitive case and *of*-relations).

Table 8: Amharic verbal nouns are gerunds

Properties	Nomings (Amh)	Possings (Amh)
Adverbial modifiers	✓	✓
Take direct objects	✓	✓
Assign structural case to their objects	✓	✓
Appear in argument positions	✓	✓
Receive structural case	✓	✓
Serve as complements of prepositions	✓	✓
Assign genitive(inherent) case to their arguments	*	✓
Possessive Agreement	✓	✓

As illustrated in the above table, the verbal nouns of Amharic satisfy all of the core criteria set for gerund-hood. Therefore, I conclude that they are indeed gerunds.

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