

## Plural independent pronouns in Amharic: A perfect form-function match

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*This paper is devoted to a point which, although quite familiar to Ethiopists, has significance for general linguistics which goes beyond the Ethiopic facts. It concerns the form of the independent plural personal pronouns (2nd and 3rd person) in Amharic. The paradigm (omitting polite forms) follows; to highlight the changes that have occurred, Amharic is compared to Classical Ge'ez, which reflects the early Semitic state of affairs.*

Amharic	SG: 1 əne, 2m antä, 2f anči, 3m əssu, ərsu, 3f əsswa, ərswa; PL: 1 ənña, 2 ənn-antä, 3 ənn-ässu, ənn-ärsu.
Ge'ez	SG: 1 ana, 2m anta, 2f anti, 3m wə'ətu, 3f yə'əti; PL: 1 nəhna, 2m ant-əmu, 2f ant-ən, 3m əmuntu, 3f əma:ntu.

*The 1sg and 2sg pronouns are transparently Semitic; the Amharic 3rd-person forms represent a grammaticalization of the word ras “head” (he = his head, himself). But in the 2nd and 3rd plural, the form has changed totally compared to Ge'ez. Instead of the inherited Semitic 2pl pronominal suffixes (ant-əmu, ant-ən), Amharic has created a new (partial) plural series with a prefix: ənn-antä. (The 1st-plural does not follow the pattern, presumably a reflection of the pan-Semitic suppletion of 1sg and 1pl pronoun roots.)*

*The etymology of this pluralizing element ənn- is known: a prefix ənnä- or əllä- functions throughout Ethiosemitic as an “associative plural” with proper nouns, e.g. from “Ras Yohannəs” we have ənnä-[Ras Yohannəs] “Ras Yohannes and his associates”. In Amharic this same prefix is also used as a pronominal associative plural, which makes excellent sense: ənn-antä would then mean “you and your associates”. Going further back in the history of Ethiosemitic, the element əllä has an earlier function in Ge'ez which harmonizes perfectly with this associative plural meaning: it is the plural of the demonstrative morpheme zä which means “that-of”, so that əllä means “those-of”: “those-of Ras Yohannes” = Ras Yohannes and his associates; “those-of you” = you and your associates = “you-plural”.*

*These facts per se are familiar. The novel significance here, however, lies in pointing out the perfect correspondence between the morphological form and the semantics. It has been frequently observed that the so-called “1st-person plural” and “2nd-person plural” pronouns are typically not true semantic plurals (i.e. almost never multiple speakers, and very often not multiple hearers). Rather, these plurals are associative plurals: “the speaker and his associates”, “the hearer and his associates”. The remarkable thing about the Amharic 2pl pronoun is that it explicitly conveys **exactly** this nuance. There are other languages where plural pronouns are derived from singular by means of morphemes that **suggest** associative plurality — e.g. Spanish nos-otros (lit. we others) or Tok Pisin mi-pela “we” (lit. me fellow) — but I have not seen any cases where pronominal associative plurality is marked in such a completely transparent and explicit way as it is in Amharic.*